Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives

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Wom(b)an: A Cultural-Narrative Reading of the Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives

By

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Gye Nyame, "Except God" (Akan Symbol of God's supremacy).
Nyame Ɔbaatanpa, "Na wo na woyii me firii me na yam, metua me na nufuɔ ano no, na womaa me anidasoɔ. Mefiri yafunum ara na wɔde me too wo soɔ, wone me Nyankopɔn firi me naa yam." Nnwom 22:9–10 (*Psalm 22:9–10*).

Akokɔ nan tia ba, na ennkum ba (Adinkra Symbol of Motherhood and Nurture).
Niwaa Abena Gyasiwaa Apaw, wo yɛ Ɔbaatan ampa!
Mpanimfoɔ se: "Nea wabɔ di bi." Me mpaebɔ ara ne sɛ wo bɛ nya w'adwuma pa mu mfasoɔ. Ɛnyɛ hɔ sa. Twerɛ Kronkron se: Ɔbaa a n'anim teɛ nya animuonyam ... Ɔbaa nyansafoɔ si ne dan (*Mmebusɛm 11:16; 14:1*[a]) (Proverbs 11:16; 14:1[a]). *W'ayɛ w'adwuma ama na yɛfɛ. Ɔdomankoma Nyame nhyira wo, ɔnhwɛ wo so, ɔnte n'anim nkyerɛ wo, ɔnnom wo, ɔmma n'ani so nhwɛ wo, na ɔmma wo asomdwoeɛ.*
For my Mum, thank you for all your love, support and sacrifice. Your labour is not in vain.

Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn. *"Yɛtoatoa mu sɛ nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn; nkwa mu a, yetoa mu, owuo mu a, yetoa mu; abusua mu nnte da"* (Adinkra Symbol of Relationship).
In memory of Aunty Abena "Abby" Bonsu, who went to rest on Tuesday 25th March 2014. The love you lavished on us will be remembered. May you rest in peace until we meet in Eternity.

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Abbreviations

ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
AES	*Archives Europeennes de Sociologie*
Afr Arts	*African Arts*
AJSL	*American Journal of Semitic languages and Literature*
ANE	Ancient Near East
ANET	Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament. Edited by J. B. Pritchard. Princeton, NJ: 1954.
AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
AOS	American Oriental Series
AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BAR	*Biblical Archaeology Review*
BibInt	*Biblical Interpretation*
BR	*Biblical Research*
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CH	Code of Hammurabi
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
HB	Hebrew Bible
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
JAAS	*Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*
JANESCU	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JATS	*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JBS	*Journal of Black Studies*
JCR	*Journal of Childhood and Religion*
JEA	*Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*
JESHO	*Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
JHS	*Journal of the Hebrew Scriptures*

JIAI	*Journal of the International African Institute*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JPS	Jewish Publication Society
JRA	*Journal of Religion in Africa*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
JSS	*Journal of Semitic Studies*
JTSA	*Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*
MAL	Middle Assyrian Laws
MQR	*Michigan Quarterly Review*
NAC	New American Commentary
NEA	*Near Eastern Archaeology*
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
Or	*Orientalia*
OTL	Old Testament Library
OtSt	Oudtestamentische Studiën
Proof	*Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*
RevExp	*Review & Expositor*
RT	*Religion & Theology*
SAA	State Archives of Assyria
SBLWAW	Society of Biblical Literature Writings from the Ancient World
ScrB	*Scripture Bulletin*
Semeia	*Semeia*
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
SSN	Studia Semitica Neerlandica
TCS	Texts from Cuneiform Studies
UF	*Ugarit-Forschungen*
USQR	*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WW	*Word & World*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

CHAPTER 1

Wom(b)an: An Introduction

Infertility is an experience that transcends time and geographical boundaries: it is an experience that knows no cultural boundaries. Yet, the time and place in which a person lives can significantly nuance the ways in which she/he experiences infertility. Additionally, infertility may be either limited to a biomedical abnormality or assigned deeper existential meanings such as punishment for spiritual unfaithfulness or past misdeeds. The variety of beliefs and responses to infertility make it such a complex experience that can have religious, economic, and cultural layers. These layers mean that for most infertility is not only a biological matter but also one that potentially affects the other aspects of an individual's, even community's, life. This book examines the multifaceted experience of infertility as presented in several narratives within the Hebrew Bible (HB).

The rise of feminist HB scholarship in the 1970's prompted greater interest and investigation into the lives of women in the ancient Near East (ANE) and the HB. By and large feminist scholars have employed narrative, social-scientific, anthropological and archaeological methodologies to investigate "Eve," the typical ANE woman in her cultural and religious setting.[1] Concern regarding the maltreatment and abuse of ancient women came to the fore in Trible's *Texts of Terror*,[2] while attempts to prove the influence[3] and shrewdness[4] of women has also been explored in HB studies.

1 See Meyers who uses ethnoarchaeological methodology (a combination of archaeology and anthropology) in her work, *Discovering Eve*. I disagree with Meyers' assumption that the named biblical women are not at all representative of ordinary Israelite women. In my opinion, her distinction between "biblical woman" and the "ordinary Hebrew woman" which leads her to believe that we cannot reconstruct the Hebrew woman, is unconvincing. While we cannot be dogmatic about details and should not oversimplify, concerns over historicity need not negate the historical elements of the narratives that would reflect the realities of Israelite women. The theological or polemic intent(s) of the narratives do not necessarily deny the historical realities that can be used to better envisage the lives of women in Israel.

2 Trible, *Texts of Terror*.

3 Schneider attempts to prove this through her methodology "verbing the character." Her aim is to investigate the characterisation of the women in Genesis by looking at the times when they are the subject of a verb and when they are objects of verbs and prepositional phrases; Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 11.

4 Studies opposing and arguing for the position that HB women (e.g. Rebekah, Tamar and Lot's daughters) assumed the role of tricksters as a way of shrewdly subverting traditional power

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In recent decades there has been increasing critique on the imposition of modern Western standards onto the interpretation of the HB.[5] A close reading of the biblical text prioritizes the social and cultural milieu of Israel and the wider ANE context. Thus, caricatures of all Israelite women as one-dimensional, flat characters may be laid aside in order to discover fresh and organic women-centred readings of the HB narratives. How does one in a contemporary Western perspective come to the biblical text with fresh eyes and the ability to read the text in its cultural context? This study suggests that a cultural-comparative approach provides a helpful way forward. In such an approach we can journey more successfully into the narrative and cultural world via an examination of women in a similar traditional culture. *Wom(b)an: A Cultural Narrative Reading of The Hebrew Bible Barrenness Narratives* proposes that, since similarities have been attested between ancient Hebrew and traditional Akan[6] cultures,[7] this African perspective provides a helpful interpretive bridge between modern Western perspectives and the original HB and ANE contexts.

Women within the HB barrenness narratives are the central focus of the present work. Archaeological findings and research on ANE treaties and Ugaritic myths and legends have uncovered the reality that human fertility, as well as fertility of the land, was associated with divine blessing. Conversely infertility was prevalently construed as a curse of the gods. The weight of such a belief buttressed the general outlook that a childless person was "less than a complete human being."[8] Children were essential to the preservation and

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roles are available. See Steinberg, "Israelite Tricksters," 1–13. Also, Jackson, "Lot's Daughters and Tamar as Tricksters," 29–46; Engar, "Old Testament Women as Tricksters," 143–57.

5 An instance of imposing modern Western categories on the Hebrew text is found in the area of social organisation. In decades past it was common to read about the "office" of a prophet imbedded within centralized and systematic cult. Such an interpretation came from "modern contact that naturally associates religious (and political) expression with formally organized, institutional settings, groups and activities"; Herion, "The Impact of Modern and Social Science," 5.

6 Akan designates a major group of tribes within Ghana, West Africa. Within the Akan ethnic group there are subgroups such as the Ashanti, Ahanta, Akyem, Akuapem and Fante tribes. This study chooses to focus on the Akan since other Ghanaian tribal groups are not necessarily matrilineal.

7 Some anthropologists and theologians have seen similarities between the two cultures: see Thomas E. Bowdich, *An Essay on the Superstitions, Customs, and Arts, Common to the Ancient Egyptians, Abyssinians, and Ashantees*; William Turnbull Balmer, *A History of the Akan Peoples of the Gold Coast; Joseph J. Williams, Hebrewisms of West Africa*; and Joseph B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*.

8 Rooy, "Fertility as Blessing and Infertility as Curse," 225.

development of an agrarian society like that of ancient Israel.[9] Still, the experience of infertility involved more than a lack of heirs or human labour for agricultural and household duties.

To a greater extent infertility affects the honour bestowed on a person since, "in Israel many children were an honour and infertility was seen as a trial or chastisement from God, or even as a disgrace."[10] The ANE context then did not propagate attitudes that were accepting of, or even sympathetic towards infertility.[11] In Hebrew culture, as in Akan culture, childbirth is central to a woman's identity.[12] In this book, the original word "wom(b)an" underscores the centrality of the womb to an ANE woman's identity thereby elucidating the desperation and disgrace that the barren woman endured.

There is a pronounced motif of the barren woman in the HB. The characters under investigation include Sarah, the wife of Abraham (Gen 11:27–23:30); Rebekah, the wife of Isaac (Gen 25); Rachel, the wife of Jacob (Gen 30); Manoah's wife (Judg 13); Hannah (1 Sam 1–2); Michal, the wife of King David (2 Sam 6); and the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 4). Alter explains the barrenness tradition as a "type-scene," which is indicated by "the report of the wife's barrenness (amplified by the optional motif of the fertile co-wife less loved by the husband than is the childless wife); the promise, through oracle or divine messenger or man of God, of the birth of a son; and cohabitation resulting in conception and birth."[13] This barrenness type-scene is in direct opposition to the *tôlĕdôt* (Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2), which is the foundation of Israelite society. It is no exaggeration to state that infertility

9 "Our hypothesis that the demands of pioneer work would have created an impetus for women to bear more children suggests a possible influence on the importance of maternity in pioneer Israel"; Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 57.

10 Rooy, "Fertility as Blessing and Infertility as Curse," 225.

11 The only known endorsement of infertility is in a little-known Sumero-Babylonian text cited by Meyers, "In addition let there be a third category among the peoples, (let there be) among the peoples women who bear and women who do not bear. Let there be among the peoples the *Pasittu*-demon to snatch the baby from the lap of her who bore it. Establish *Ugbabtu*-women, *Entu*-women, and *Igisitu*-women, and let them be taboo and so stop childbirth"; Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 103. This divine directive is a response to the overpopulation and "the great noise of mankind"; Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 119–20.

12 "Archaeological excavations have produced variously sized terracotta statues, typically images of women, from Israelite and other Near Eastern cultures, which have been identified as fertility figurines. These artefacts demonstrate the need and importance attributed to bearing children"; Burgh, "1–2 Samuel," 124.

13 Alter, *The David Story*, 3.

is the greatest threat to the continuity of the *tôlĕdôt* (Gen 11:30; 15:2–3; 16:1; 17:17; 18:11–12; 25:21; 29:31; 30:1; 30:22).[14]

While past research on the barrenness type-scene has been very helpful, this present work goes further to suggest another classification of barrenness that it terms "social barrenness." Social barrenness refers to the women in the HB who biologically may be able to give birth but due to circumstances, such as widowhood or estrangement from a husband, are unable to do so. For instance, a widow who is childless because she has outlived her children is not distinguished from a married childless woman. Although of differing marital statuses, the aforementioned women are all barren in Hebrew culture. The women who can be classified as socially barren in the HB are Leah, Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Ruth, Naomi and Michal the wife of King David.[15]

Within the HB barrenness may be a manifestation of being under a curse. Human, animal or agricultural barrenness may signal divine punishment.[16] Yet, the barrenness narratives do not highlight a cause and effect relationship between a person's wrongdoing and barrenness. In examining the narratives of barren women several ideas will be explored. What can the narratives tell us about the way(s) in which the biblical women coped with their barrenness? Of interest will be the solutions sought as well as the roles that other characters, such as husbands, play in the experience. The nature of an encounter with Yahweh, or his intermediary, will also convey the theological intent of the narrative.[17] The narratives' cultural details and theological values vividly

14 "Barrenness is not just a personal and family tragedy. It functions as a threat to the fulfilment of God's promise. Abram articulates the dilemma in Gen 15:3, 'you have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir'"; Scalise, "'I Have Produced a Man with the Lord'," 580.

15 Naomi's sons are deceased. Interestingly, the narrative will highlight the fact that the birth of Obed is more socially beneficial to Naomi than to her daughter-in-law, Ruth (Ruth 4:16–17).

16 See Gen 20:17–18 when Yahweh punishes Abimelech's household with barrenness because he took Sarah into his household. Also, Yahweh promises that if his people worship him and stay true to the covenant they will avoid barrenness along with other tragedies (Exod 23:26; Deut 7:13).

17 While the Hebrew context presents barrenness primarily as a woman's problem, the narratives show YHWH's concern and intervention on behalf of the barren women. This divine concern for the fertility of women is evident in the divine encounters and dialogue which the women experience. In the larger scheme of things Yahweh's grace and gift of fertility to these women serve as the foundation of Israelite history. "It is a favourite motif in folktales that the hero be born after his mother has been long barren … The child, who is later to become a special man, is born under extraordinary circumstances: a heavenly being predicts the birth (Gen 16:18; Judg 13; Luke 1) and at the same time bestows on him a name and with it his future fate"; Gunkel, *The Folktale in the Old Testament*, 127–28.

portray the experience of childlessness. To further elucidate the experience of infertility in the HB we will draw on research about women in the ANE and traditional cultures today.

Relevant Research

While numerous monographs and commentaries have considered the issue of infertility, few studies have been dedicated to the individual barrenness narratives, and fewer still have studied the narratives as a larger motif within the HB.[18] A number of masters and doctoral theses have been written on infertility,[19] but three significant studies by Mary Callaway, Chiropafadzo Moyo and Candida Moss and Joel Baden stand out.

In *Sing, O Barren One*, Mary Callaway shows how the barren matriarch tradition was interpreted and re-interpreted throughout the history of Israel. At the time of her study, Callaway noted that the barrenness narratives had not been "seriously studied as a corpus."[20] Furthermore, Callaway asserted that the stories should not be "lumped" together so as to drown out the peculiarities of each narrative. Although she examines several barrenness narratives, her focus is on their reinterpretation in second Temple Jewish Midrash. For her the barrenness tradition is a test case for understanding the pattern of early Jewish exegesis.[21]

Callaway's research is valuable in that she finds the barrenness "tradition becomes more and more important in the Second Temple period and it appears to be cumulative; new uses of the tradition do not go back to the sources only, but build on the interpretations which had grown up around it and,

18 There are more devotional works on the barrenness narratives than academic studies.

19 Sterrett, "Barrenness and Birth"; Thames, "A Suggested Origin, Development, and Interpretation of the Concept of Barrenness"; McCray-Worrall, "Barrenness of Body and Voice: The Need for a New Conception"; Vetter, "From Barrenness to Blessing"; Hanak, "Is Anything Too Hard for the Lord?"; Barina, "Perspectives on Barrenness"; Mix, "A Narrative-Critical Interpretation of Genesis 16 and 21"; Meade, "The Status and Role of Motherhood in Ancient Israelite Narratives"; Forsythe, "From Barrenness to Birth Stories of Impossibilities and Life"; Olson, "Access and Denial: Opening and Closing the Wombs of the Matriarchs of Genesis and Hannah"; Johnson, "Barrenness, Birth, and Biblical Allusions in Luke 1–2"; Corker, "Infertility in the Old Testament Divine Curse or Divine Encounter?"; Derck, "Barrenness in the Old Testament"; Cook, "Toward a Theology of Divine Causality"; and O'Reilly, "Where is My Comfort?".

20 Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 18.

21 Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 4.

apparently, become authoritative."[22] While Callaway calls her approach "comparative midrash" it bears similarities with the tradition-historical approach. Callaway's "comparative midrash" centres on "re-contextualisation." Traditions are continually being contextualised for the new generation and contemporary audience; as such even the oldest traditions take on new meanings, however slight the nuances may be.

The function of the barrenness motif, in Callaway's view, is threefold. First, the motif identifies Yahweh as the only one who can open and shut wombs. Second, the motif emphasises that it is Yahweh, not the Patriarchs, who fulfil the covenant promise. Third, the motif presents the ultimate obstacle to the promise (barrenness) to reveal the power of Yahweh.[23]

Barren Sarah, Rachel and Leah, Rebekah and Hannah are treated in Callaway's study. Yet, surprisingly Manoah's wife and the Shunammite woman are excluded but perhaps this is because they are not prominent figures within Second Temple literature. Insightful is Callaway's section on the barren motif in the Isaianic corpus. She rightly posits that the use of the barren motif in Isaiah 54 would have given authority to the prophetic discourse of comfort and hope.[24] This is evidence of the motif's function during the exilic period. Callaway's examination of the tradition is conducive to the present study. Further contribution to Callaway's findings can be made by examining Manoah's wife and the Shunammite woman and highlighting the cultural details within the narratives.

Another noteworthy study on barrenness has been completed by Chiropafadzo Moyo.[25] Moyo interprets Hannah's narrative from her own perspective as a Karanga (Zimbabwe) woman. Moyo's choice of Vernon Robbins' socio-rhetorical method is curious since he is a NT scholar and his approach has not frequently been applied to HB passages.[26] According to Robbins there are five textures to any biblical text: the inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture and sacred texture.[27] These categories are used to derive the theological as well as the cultural messages of the narratives.

The second section of Moyo's dissertation is an analysis of the empirical research carried out on Karanga women dealing with infertility. In addition to

22 Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 5.

23 Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 32.

24 Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 70.

25 Moyo, "A Karanga Perspective."

26 Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*. Robbins' method is summarised at the beginning of Moyo's research, Moyo, "A Karanga Perspective," 3–14.

27 Moyo, "A Karanga Perspective," 3.

the distribution of one hundred questionnaires, Moyo conducted face-to-face interviews with respondents of various ages. In due course Moyo wanted to establish the ways in which the Hannah narrative has and can be used to speak to attitudes and experiences of infertility in Zimbabwe. From the feedback some of the female respondents believed that infertility was a blessing for Hannah because when Yahweh finally gave her a son she gave him the best possible future and was rewarded with several more children.[28] Most of the respondents, however, maintained that there could never be any positive or blessed element in infertility; it is always a curse from God.[29]

Moyo's integration of empirical research in the Karanga community also showed that the families and neighbours of childless women often shame and deride them. The socio-rhetorical approach revealed that Hannah experienced shame and was troubled to the extent that a good marriage could no longer comfort her. Such studies, which combine HB interpretation with relevant parallels in traditional African cultures, highlight the challenge and consequences of infertility. These dynamics while present may be less pervasive and less consequential in Western cultures.

In *Reconceiving Infertility* Moss and Baden offer thought-provoking interpretations that challenge readers to re-examine and reconceive views of fertility and infertility. The legal, social, sexual, political, and spiritual aspects of infertility should not be relegated to the background but rather brought to the fore. The appeal to various cultural and religious communities is clear: reframe discussions and behaviour toward infertile individuals.

Reconceiving Infertility proposes that the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Manoah's wife, and Hannah help readers reimagine infertility as the stories may counter popular assumptions regarding the causes of infertility. For Moss and Baden the phrase "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28) is not a divine dictate but a blessing. Framing fertility as a blessing places the onus on Yahweh not on human beings. Distinctively, Moss and Baden offer that the Hebrew Bible's motif of God opening the womb suggests that infertility is the default state of every woman and therefore without stigma. Some readers, particularly from non-Western backgrounds like that of Akan culture in Ghana, may find such assertions perplexing since they push against widespread beliefs of fertility as a norm and infertility as a disability.

Moss and Baden not only use the Hebrew Bible to reframe infertility but also make reference to New Testament writings and Graeco-Roman literature. Citing adoption practices in the Graeco-Roman world, the authors point out

28 Moyo, "A Karanga Perspective," 149.

29 Moyo, "A Karanga Perspective," 150.

that sonship by adoption was preferable to biological sonship. Some Roman authors even promoted the idea that adopted sons were superior to biological ones as there was the opportunity to choose someone of worthy character whereas such characteristics were not always guaranteed in one's own progeny. The contribution of this information is that adoption is promoted as authentic parenthood and not an inferior social option. If Jesus is the divinely adopted son, then special significance is attributed to families and communities configured through adoption.

The apostle Paul, a proponent of celibacy, regarded marriage, and therefore procreation, as a distraction from the duties of the Lord. The authors assert that if Paul was a champion of celibacy then it follows that he was is in favor of childlessness. This idea perhaps will be the most challenging for some contemporary religious audiences. The idea that singleness, celibacy, and childlessness could really be preferred to their alternatives may be uncomfortable for many cultural communities. However, this discomfort is perhaps precisely what Moss and Baden hope will stimulate sensitivity and a change of behavior toward childless members of these various communities.

Another distinctive feature of *Reconceiving Infertility* is the idea of "eschatological infertility"; procreation will not exist in the *eschaton* thereby making infertility the eternal norm. Eschatological infertility, then, de-stigmatizes and normalizes infertility. Moss and Baden maintain that people should not be compelled to cure or remedy all cases of infertility. For instance, the anonymous Woman with the haemorrhage (Mark 5:25–34) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) are interpreted as non-procreative persons whose infertility is not remedied but instead they are idealized as inheritors of the kingdom of heaven. In the *eschaton* "barrenness is not the exception to the rule; it is the new rule. It is not the new normal; it is the heavenly ideal."[30] Since infertility, or childlessness, is a significant sign of the new age this knowledge can be a source of hope and comfort for infertile persons in the present age.

Moss and Baden highlight, and then take exception to, the historical and present reality in which childless women are critically cast as suspicious figures. Stigmatization of infertile couples as selfish is not only an ancient issue but also a contemporary reality. Infertility is an "invisible disability" that impacts people in manifold ways. The book stimulates further discussion on religious views regarding medical intervention for infertility, voluntary childlessness, and adoption as authentic parenthood.

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30 Moss and Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness*, 228.

The authors helpfully distinguish between various terminologies such as "infertility," "barrenness," and "childlessness." The clarification of these words is beneficial, yet the primary context being addressed is the modern West. How might individuals and couples within non-Western communities define and grapple with these terminologies? Moss and Baden's study is both thorough and beneficial. This present work goes further in seeking to frame the discussion from the perspective of a non-Western culture in which infertility is inextricably linked to identity and cultural connection.

Methodology

The wom(b)an reading is a cultural-narrative approach that integrates the strengths of different methodologies: ancient Near Eastern studies, narrative criticism, cultural anthropology, and African biblical interpretation. While these methodologies are undoubtedly different they are complementary since narrative readings of biblical texts are often supplemented with social-scientific and anthropological insights, and African biblical interpretation is largely focused on the similar cultural realities imbedded in the HB narratives. This study will nuance the combination of these methodologies. Each methodology holds certain presuppositions, which, in my opinion, may be further nuanced, in order to allow the narratives to communicate their full cultural and theological value. Subsequently, I will offer a brief description of the methods' usefulness for this study as well as some critique and points of alteration that I will make in my wom(b)an reading.

This research proposes that the HB narratives are reflective of cultural realities. Additionally, these narratives ultimately intend to convey the acts and intervention of YHWH within this cultural milieu. Since in the history of Christian tradition these narratives have mostly been interpreted from Western perspectives it is useful to see what contribution can be made by non-Western perspectives.[31] It is the assertion of this study that an Akan reading will allow the reader to further appreciate the reasons for the distress, desperation and certain actions of the barren women. Additionally, the Akan perspective brings to

31 African readings of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament vary in the degree of suppositions they accept from traditional Western interpretations of Christianity. While there are some African biblical scholars who propose that Christianity can never be germane to African cultures, there are others who have proposed that Christianity can be contextualised in a way that is organic to cultures on the continent. For example, see Bediako, "Jesus in African Culture."

the fore another significant category of infertility that will be examined: social barrenness.

Ancient Near Eastern Studies

The present work's wom(b)an reading draws from the field of ancient Near Eastern studies. An examination of women's fertility in the ANE forms a helpful background for the study of infertility in the HB. The comparative method suggests that a comparison of Israelite and other ANE cultures is helpful in order to better understand and appreciate Israelite history. Dalley notes the various parallels between the characters and culture described in the HB, and those described in Mesopotamian literature.[32] The similarities of creation stories, genealogies, laws, rituals, prophecy, and wisdom sayings may not be easily overlooked. Since the HB does not always offer detailed background information and explanations for certain cultural elements, it is helpful to find parallels in ANE literature that are more detailed. Countries that share close geographical, linguistic and cultural ties are reasonable case studies for the comparative approach. The comparative approach in HB studies "removed biblical Israel from the cultural and conceptual seclusion imposed upon it by the isolationist ideology which characterizes generally the biblical, and particularly the prophetic, outlook."[33]

Indeed, caution should be taken in any comparative work. Talmon proposes a prudent way when he suggests that inner-biblical parallels must precede and be prioritized above extra-biblical parallels for what may be viewed as parallel cultural phenomena may actually function differently in the compared culture.[34] We do not insist that these cultures, Israelite and larger ANE, are completely analogous,[35] rather that the parallels are helpful in illuminating details that the HB does not explain. As such in the comparative approach we appreciate the "historic stream" within which the neighbouring cultures develop and interact, yet we respect the unique ways of these cultures by avoiding "grand scale" comparisons.[36] In this study the procedure of investigating

32 Dalley, "The Influence of Mesopotamia Upon Israel and the Bible," 57–83.

33 Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," 386.

34 Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," 415.

35 As Stol reminds us that when dealing with ANE materials we are covering a large duration of time, about three thousand years, and multiple regions; Stol, "Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia," 485.

36 Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation—Principles and Problems," 415.

infertility in the broader ANE context is not to suggest direct correspondence to Israel but rather to better see the differences and similarities in attitudes that the HB presents. In this manner this study will not try to diminish the differences for the sake of "clean" comparative conclusions. The ANE background will inform the study's narrative approach, which is concerned with characterisation and the cultural elements connected with infertility.

Narrative Criticism

HB narrative criticism is a diverse field.[37] As a result one has to be more specific than declaring that they are using a narrative approach. Questions that need to be answered are; whose narrative approach will be used and what is the focus of that particular approach? For this study I have selected the narrative approach of Robert Alter. Such a narrative approach gives priority to the final form of the biblical text.

Alter began his work because he believed that biblical narratives received inadequate literary analysis and that its artistry and aesthetic value had largely been ignored. Defining most of Hebrew narrative as "prose fiction," Alter maintained that historiographical concerns were beside the point and the world of the narrative should rather be in focus.[38] A presupposition that is foundational to *The Art of Biblical Narrative* is that the HB narratives were polemic products and therefore not indicative of real events and historical characters. While drawing on Alter's work, the present investigation assumes that the theological and polemic nature of the narratives does not negate the existence of these characters and events.

Undoubtedly, a significant contribution by Alter has been his definition and explanation of the type-scene phenomenon. A type-scene occurs when "more or less the same story often seems to be told two or three or more times about different characters, or sometimes even about the same character in different sets of circumstances."[39] Some other type-scenes in the HB are the wife-sister stories of Abraham and Isaac, the meeting of a future spouse at a well, and the testament of an important figure who is dying.[40]

Recognition of a type-scene is important since it is a device used to create connections in the reader's mind between characters and events that allow

37 See Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*; Fewell and Gunn *Narrative in the HB*; Perry "The King through Ironic Eyes"; Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*; Bar–Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*; and Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*.

38 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 24.

39 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 49.

40 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 51.

contrasts and comparisons to become more evident. For instance, an element of the type-scene is that the barren yet preferred wife is favoured above the fruitful wife/concubine, as in the stories of Rachel-Leah and Hannah-Peninnah. Therefore, as we begin the story of Hannah and are introduced to spiteful Peninnah we can anticipate that there are significant comparisons to be made with Rachel and Leah in Genesis.[41]

Additionally, Alter's work emphasises the importance of characterisation. An in-depth examination of the portrayal of barren women is vital. Ancient women were not only one-dimensional individuals who continually lacked agency. The present study's focus on characterisation, exploring the voice and action of barren women, will challenge such flat interpretations.[42] Therefore, I will supplement Alter's interpretive tools with other HB scholarship relevant to the characterisation of the barren women.[43] Essentially, narrative criticism's greatest contribution to HB studies was to awaken us to the reality that Hebrew culture, theology and ideology are conveyed through narrative and its elements. Our primary curiosity is how the characters' actions and interactions impact their infertility experiences. We will mine the meaning(s) of the narrative and discover its cultural life and theological purpose(s).

Cultural Anthropology

To uncover further the cultural life behind the narratives we will draw insights from cultural anthropology.[44] A number of earlier critical HB scholars used cultural anthropology in an effort to reconstruct Israelite culture and society. Wellhausen's studies of Muslim societies and Gunkel's use of Scandinavian tradition and folklore to examine the biblical text are some examples of this

41 This story "invokes the background of an eminently matriarchal biblical type-scene: the annunciation of the birth of a hero to the barren wife"; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 82.

42 Meyers cautions against this presentism so pervasive in modern scholarship. "Presentist stereotypes" must be quelled if we are to truly appreciate the familial, economic, political, social and spiritual lives of women; Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, 123.

43 Such as those by Alice Bach, Adele Berlin, J. Cheryl Exum, Esther Fuchs and Lieve Teugels. Bach, Women in the *HB*; Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative"; Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*; Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers"; and Teugels, "'A Strong Woman, Who Can Find?'".

44 The term "cultural anthropology" is used more in North American circles while the term "social anthropology" is frequently used in the British context, but both are synonymous.

early use of anthropology.[45] Subsequently, HB studies on Israelite nomadism,[46] sacrifice,[47] divination and prophecy,[48] using ethnographies have followed suit. Ethnography, a subfield of anthropology, refers to the research produced by anthropologists who have engaged in participant-observation of a specific culture. For such anthropologists the aim is not to study a culture systematically in a detached way but to spend time immersed in the language and everyday customs of the people. The result of an immersion experience is ethnography.

Edmund Leach, a colleague of Levi-Strauss, was a pioneer in applying the latter's structural theories to the HB. Leach analysed Solomon's succession narrative from the standpoint of endogamy and exogamy and saw in the genealogy an attempt to prove the legitimacy of Solomon's reign.[49] Interestingly, anthropologists showed as much interest in applying their fieldwork to the HB literature as HB scholars did in using anthropology to interpret the HB.[50] Since functional anthropology prefers specificity to generalities its strength has been the numerous ethnographies as opposed to the general study of society that is characteristic of structural anthropology.[51]

There are potential limitations when applying anthropology. It is important for the biblical scholar to be current with the latest ethnographies related to the area of study and caution must be taken if these ethnographies have been heavily criticised by anthropologists in the field.[52] The comparative nature of anthropological studies may also tempt the biblical scholar to eclipse the text with whatever information can be found from the contemporary culture

45 Wilson, "Anthropology and the Study of the Old Testament," 175–76.

46 Gottwald, "Were the Early Israelites Pastoral Nomads?," 223–55.

47 Leach, "The Logic of Sacrifice," 136–50.

48 Grabbe, "Shaman, Preacher, or Spirit Medium?," 117–32.

49 Leach, "The Legitimacy of Solomon," 131–76. See also, Leach and Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*. The strict application of anthropological structures and theories onto the biblical text has been criticised as lacking sensitivity and taking priority away from the biblical text. For a critique of Leach's work see Rogerson, "Structural Anthropology and the Old Testament," 496–99.

50 For example see the work of renowned anthropologist Mary Douglas, a scholar within the British school of Anthropology. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*. Douglas examines defilement and purity within the book of Leviticus. Also see Douglas' *In the Wilderness* and *Leviticus as Literature*.

51 Wilson, "Anthropology and the Study of the Old Testament," 177. For Wilson this is the strength of functional anthropology that it makes available a vast array of ethnographic data from which the biblical scholar may draw. In short, the argument is that the functions of a society determine its structure and not vice versa.

52 Fiensy, "Using the Nuer Culture of Africa," 74.

under study.[53] In such a case, an understanding that evident similarities do not equal exact correspondence can serve as a restraint to such a temptation.

Wom(b)an utilises anthropological insights on the issues of gender roles and socialisation, kinship, rites of passage, ritual, nomenclature and the phenomenon of honour-shame. Anthropology will help uncover the initiation and implications of the dominant honour-shame system in the ANE, Mediterranean and contemporary African societies. Additionally, the aims and consequences of gender socialisation and roles will be insightful in helping us interpret the women in the HB narratives.[54] This study utilises anthropological theory and description but will rely heavily on ethnographies that highlight these cultural phenomena in the Akan culture.[55] The ethnographies will be helpful in drawing comparative lines between the Hebrew and Akan contexts, thereby elucidating the characters and plot of the biblical narrative.

The key steps of the anthropological approach will be to identify the behaviour, customs and traditions within the barrenness narratives that teach or reinforce beliefs regarding gender, kinship, ritual, rites of passage, nomenclature and honour-shame. The identification and explication of these cultural elements will be enabled by anthropological theory and ethnography. Ethnographic studies on the Akan of Ghana will clarify the importance of fertility and the turmoil and shame for childless people in traditional cultures.

While focusing on the correspondences between the Hebrew and Akan cultures this book does not attempt to prove direct descent of West African tribes from the Hebrew or other ANE peoples or to prove that the two are completely analogous.[56] Some have criticized such proposals, and the hesitation to see the West African peoples as direct descendants of ANE peoples has been suspiciously vigorous.[57] Further, a comparative analysis of ANE, Hebrew and Akan cultures may seem needlessly eclectic, yet, HB scholarship has long utilised anthropological and sociological studies to facilitate further understanding of the HB. The specific similarities between African cultures and ANE

53 Overholt describes this as "submerging the particularity of the specific cultures in a sea of sterile generalization"; Overholt, *Cultural Anthropology and the Old Testament*, 10.

54 Sociologists and Anthropologists distinguish between sex and gender. "Gender" refers to socially constructed roles and norms informally or formally taught to boys and girls from a young age, while "sex" simply refers to the biological anatomy of an individual.

55 Examples of HB scholars who have combined anthropological theory and ethnographies in their work are Carol L. Meyers, Naomi Steinberg and Lyn Bechtel.

56 The following studies by anthropologists and theologians are among those who have proposed this: see Bowditch, *An Essay on the Superstitions*; Balmer, *A History of the Akan Peoples*; Williams, *Hebrewisms of West Africa*; and Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God*.

57 Goody, "Ethnohistory and the Akan of Ghana," 76.

cultures may be disputed by some, yet it is interesting that such arguments are not often levelled against connections drawn from Scandinavian or other European cultures. Interpreation strongly informed by the aforementioned European cultures has informed a considerable amount of critical HB scholarship.[58] *Wom(b)an* maintains that traditional Akan society brings a needed perspective to the analysis of HB texts. It is to this end that *Wom(b)an* employs an ethnographic approach.

African Biblical Interpretation

Theological reflection has been alive in Africa for centuries. There is a long and rich history of oral tradition that has been passed down within communities across the continent. With the rise of Christianity came more African scholars such as Clement, Origen, Didymus the Blind, Cyprian, Tertullian, Athanasius, Cyril and Augustine, names that need little introduction in the West.[59] All made contributions to the Christian church, some in controversial and less-controversial ways. The imperial contexts in which these individuals lived also shaped much of their apologetic and theological treatises so that the patristic period reflects this cultural climate. Unfortunately, some of the patristic literature makes it difficult to successfully analyse the connection between African traditional religion and its connection with Judaism and Christianity. While Africans have long been engaged in formal theology, not all theological reflection has been distinctly African.

It is also important to recognise that African biblical interpretation is far more than a formal or academic enterprise. A tradition of informal readings emerged out of conversations fostered in community. While in Western contexts the thoughts of key individual theological scholars are often centre stage, in African contexts we think about hermeneutics and interpretations that emerge from communities such as villages, churches, women's groups, particular tribes and so forth. The idea of valuing the readings of "the ordinary reader" is characteristically African. In Christian communities within the Akan culture there are groups of women who sing *ebibindwom* "indigenous music."[60] The distinctive feature of *Ebibindwom* in Christian circles is that traditionally it was a way to include non-literate older women in the act of reciting and

58 Gunkel's use of Scandinavian folkore and other more recent North Atlantic scholarship testify to this interpretive tendency.

59 Adamo, "The Bible in Twenty-First Century Africa," 27.

60 Oduyoye gives severeal examples of indigenous songs in Ghanaian Christian communities; Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, 45–50.

understanding Scripture.[61] The act of ingesting Scripture in one's own indigenous melodies and rhythms invalidated illiteracy as an obstacle and created more opportunity for long-term memorization and deeper meaning-making. The singing of songs, with the integral component of call and response, reinforced music as an important part of interpretation and the songs, and the accompanying percussion and dancing, as important products of theological reflection. *Ebibindwom*, and those who produce and perform them, are respected parts of liturgy.

African biblical interpretation takes seriously the primacy of oral tradition. In these contexts oral narratives are not only for entertainment but are the means through which history, values and identity are passed from one generation to the next. If African biblical interpretation must rely solely on what is written then it cannot honour the rich legacy of wisdom and experience so alive in the oral traditions and cultural practises of the continent. Further, the communal aspect of interpretation cannot be overemphasised. Theological reflection in Africa has long been in the domain of the village, the collective, rather than the primary responsibility of scholars-academics. This communalist approach impacts the reception and interpretation of Scripture's prose, poetry and prophecy.

The birth of modern formal African biblical interpretation can be traced to the field of comparative religion.[62] Scholars began to resist the implicit, and sometimes explicit, idea that African traditional religion was thoroughly pagan and that *the* truth was only delivered when the European missionaries arrived on the coasts of the continent. In this sense African interpretation is polemic; its purpose is "to call into question the old missionary strategy of a root and branch condemnation of African ways, when these were so close to the ways of the Bible itself if men [*sic*] had only had the patience to study them."[63]

The terms "African biblical interpretation" and "African theology" are often used interchangeably.[64] In contrast to the Western Academy, African

61 Adesua, "Neo-traditional Music in the Sustenance of Church Mission," 340.

62 Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 3–18.

63 Tutu, "Some African Insights and the Old Testament," 21.

64 African theology can be divided into three main categories: mission theology; "African" theology; and Black South African theology; Ngindu Mushete, "An Overview of African Theology," 13–25. Mission theology seeks to argue for the supremacy of Christianity over African Tradition Religion (ATR). "African" theology is a more comparative approach on the similarities and dissimilarities between ATR and Judeo-Christianity. Finally, black South African theology is concerned with "a critical review of racism as a global phenomenon historically bound up with the expansion of European capitalism"; Ngindu Mushete, "An Overview of African Theology," 22. Black South African theology shares much in common with African American liberation theology, typified in the work of

theological dialogue makes little discrimination between biblical studies and theology. Most biblical interpretation is woven with theological reflection and vice versa. Systematic theology in the African perspective is redundant since it is assumed that reflections on the biblical text should produce stories and proverbs upon which people may meditate and imitate, not only treatises. While some African scholars begin with a theological framework such as poverty and then fill it in with biblical material,[65] others begin from the biblical text and derive meaning and application for the African context(s). For this reason this book uses the terms "African biblical interpretation" and "African theology" interchangeably.

The great diversity of tribes and languages in Africa, even within a given country, presents the challenge of speaking for Africa as a whole. Consequently, some African scholars have embraced practising African biblical interpretation from their own national or tribal perspective.[66] While a variety of African theological perspectives are represented, further work may be contributed specifically in the area of HB exegetical work. Furthermore, West African perspectives are not plentiful, compared with other African perspectives, in the interpretation of selected HB passages or motifs. Consequently, the present study will put forward an Akan reading of the HB barrenness narratives.

The cultural comparisons between the ANE context and the Akan context will be helped with insights from African biblical interpretation. African biblical interpretation highlights the similarities between African and Hebrew cultures and religion and thus proposes that the former can further highlight and explain the cultural and religious practices of ancient Israel in the HB.[67] Additionally, in African interpretation the "ordinary reader," a person who is not a formally trained theologian or minister by vocation, is also brought into focus. The question is asked; how might this be read, interpreted and applied by a layperson? There is interest is in highlighting characters and cultural practises within the biblical text that have been overlooked or interpreted from a purely Western perspective. Linking African cultures and experiences with those of the Hebrew context means that the interpreter does not have to go from the ANE to the Western context(s) before translating the message back to contemporary African cultures. Rather, we may go directly from the ANE

James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power* (1969); *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970); *God of the Oppressed* (1975); *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1991); and *Risks of Faith* (1999).

65 See, Kimilike, *Poverty in the Book of Proverbs*.

66 See, Moyo, "A Karanga Perspective." Also, the diversity of nationalities represented in Kanyoro and Njoroge, *Groaning in Faith*.

67 African cultural hermeneutics "does not require a total rejection of dominant Western approaches"; Adamo, "The Bible in Twenty-First Century Africa," 28.

context and biblical text to the contemporary African context(s) because of the correspondences.

Given that African biblical interpretation draws from both non-Western and Western cultural anthropology no conflict of interest exists in using the African theological and anthropological methodologies in conjunction with one another. An African interpretation of an HB passage brings a fresh and diverse contribution to the larger field of HB scholarship dominated by the West. African biblical interpretation is not focused on rejecting all that is Western but rather wants to bring to the fore and highlight all that is African and relevant to the interpretation and use of the biblical text.[68]

Particularly the work of African female scholars[69] will be utilised as the unique perspectives further elucidate elements within the barrenness narratives. Some African female scholars who focus on the interests of women and marginalised individuals prefer to be called "womanist" rather than "feminist" scholars.[70] For some feminism is a Western construct which does not resonate with African womanhood. Oduyoye, a Ghanaian theologian, struggles with the use of "feminist" in an African context since the term engenders discomfort and isolation.[71] Other female scholars are much more concerned than Oduyoye. Masenya utilises an approach called "Africana womanist interpretation" which she developed using the work of Dr Hudson-Weems. Masenya sees this approach as a fitting substitute for feminism since she claims "feminism is racist in its origins. Hence, it is not an appropriate term for Black women in their unique situation."[72] The goal of these woman-centred approaches is to bring to the fore the knowledge, experience, concerns and perspectives of women.[73]

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68 "The contemporary concerns of most North Atlantic scholars, their social, political, religious and theological convictions, are often left implicit. African scholarship typically insists on grappling with the text with the explicit purpose of finding the continuing relevance of the text for present lives of African people"; LeMarquand, *An Issue of Relevance*, 5.

69 Over the last three decades African scholars such as Mercy Oduyoye; Nyambura Njoroge; Madipoane Masenya; and Rachel Kanyoro have come to the fore. Ironically while female scholars are the minority within African scholarship they have produced a significant amount of publications in recent years and as such have been important dialogue partners.

70 Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," 167.

71 Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," 167.

72 Masenya, "African Womanist Hermeneutics," 152.

73 Succinctly put, "when women read the Bible, they often hear what is unheard by men"; Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," 167. Also, Masenya, "African Womanist Hermeneutics," 150.

Africana womanist interpretations often begin from the perspective of protesting patriarchy in biblical and contemporary contexts.[74] For the most part Africana womanist theologians, as well as many feminist scholars, bemoan the negative and abusive effects of patriarchy within the biblical texts. Undoubtedly, ancient Israel was a patriarchal and patrilineal society based on the *bet 'ab* (the house of the Father).[75] Interestingly, however, are the matrilineal undercurrents[76] evident in the biblical narratives in that women fought for legacy and security through their children.[77]

While negative and destructive actions occur in the patriarchal context, it must also be pointed out that even within the patriarchal Hebrew culture one finds subversive behaviour within the barrenness narratives. Additionally, there may be ways to employ these narratives in eradicating abusive tendencies and creating opportunities for change. We may notice in the narratives some elements that, if rightly harnessed, can empower women. In terms of infertility we can see some examples of husbands who did not abuse, publicly or privately, their wives because of their barren predicament. Additionally, in some cases, the husbands do not choose a polygynous situation even if it means no progeny.[78] In another instance, a husband attempts to alleviate barrenness by praying to Yahweh on his wife's behalf.[79] The notion that patriarchal societies have so long perpetuated the woman's role as child-bearer,[80] so that men

74 For e.g., see Mbuwayesango, "Childlessness and Woman-to-Woman Relationships," 27–36. She interprets the Sarah-Hagar narrative from a Zimbabwean Woman's perspective. The conclusion of her study emphasises the oppressive and abusive nature of patriarchy both in the biblical and Zimbabwean context.

75 Meyers, "The Family in Early Israel," 19.

76 Boda also notes the presence of matrilineal genealogies within the Chronicler's genealogy in 1 Chr 1–9 (e.g., see 1 Chr 1:21–13 and 7:14–19); Boda, *1–2 Chronicles*, 26. Also, see Cynthia R. Chapman's seminal work on the significance of the maternal kinship unit in the HB; Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

77 Bronner posits that an ANE woman acquired more status as she moved from being a daughter, to a wife, and then to being a mother in her own right. She sees "maternal power" as the greatest power that any woman could have in the ANE context; Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers*.

78 Isaac (Gen 25) and Manoah (Judg 13).

79 Isaac prays for Rebekah (Gen 25:21).

80 Some feminist biblical scholars are of the opinion that the Bible propagates patriarchal ideology and consequently legitimizes male control and abuse. In this thinking motherhood is seen as a "patriarchal institution, not as personal tendency of woman"; Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 152. *Contra* Meyers, "assumptions of male dominance and female subservience in ancient Israel, derived from formal texts and

do not have to verbalise their displeasure in order for a childless woman to feel culpable, is present in feminist readings. Still, the task remains to interpret (in)fertility in non-Western cultures in ways that are germane to that community and provide liberating possibilities.

In addition to women-centred approaches, African theology employs the popular methods of narrative criticism, social science and anthropology. Further, a trend of weaving African popular literature with African biblical interpretation in order to aid the conversation between cultures exists.[81] Literature highlights the concerns of Africans and subsequently derives applications for topics like marriage, procreation, continuation of family, the perception of women in matriarchal and patriarchal communities, and purity.[82] Oduyoye urges that, "theologians and feminists should pay close attention to these themes reflected in African literature because many African women and men live these scenes most days of their lives."[83] Such literary comparisons, however, are limited in most scholarly works.

African biblical scholarship still utilises traditional historical-critical methods; text, form, source and redaction criticisms. Yet, however ingrained these methods are in the minds of Western-trained African scholars,[84] the

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postbiblical traditions, may be part of the 'myth' of male control masking a situation of male dependence … our examination of Israelite society allows us to see Eve as a figure no less powerful than her male counterpart"; Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 181.

81 For example, Oduyoye's *Daughters of Anowa*. Oduyoye uses the story *Anowa*, by renowned Ghanaian Poet and Literature Professor Ama Ata Aidoo, as the springboard for her theological discussion.

82 While Oduyoye perhaps would not refer to herself as a womanist theologian she shares many of their concerns. Oduyoye recounts her experience of infertility as an Akan woman and a Christian theologian. Recounting the desperate measures that she took in order to solve her situation, she describes her visit to a traditional-religion priest as one largely motivated by familial and societal pressure. "He simply gave me the herbs I was to brew and drink. All the bitterness that is expected to go with childlessness must have been ground into those barks and roots and leaves. My palate rejected the brew as my soul eschewed the bitterness of any sort. Such are the indignities that women go through to fulfil religio-cultural expectations"; Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself," 111.

83 Oduyoye, "Feminist Theology in an African Perspective," 177.

84 "On the one hand, biblical exegetes in Africa feel the compulsion to interpret the biblical text in the light of the present realities of the African situation. On the other hand, most professional scholarly African biblical interpreters received much of their graduate training in the North Atlantic world and so know and use North Atlantic historical-critical scholarship. While many African exegetes see positive benefits from their training in the North Atlantic historical-critical tradition, they remain concerned to keep the

sociological and anthropological approaches are still more popular.[85] Such methods enable theologians to "gain access to the religio-cultural and socio-political contexts of the biblical past that resonate with the religio-cultural and socio-political contexts of the African present."[86] When such a reading occurs the context and situation of African persons are simultaneously revealed and shaped by biblical interpretation.[87]

In making a contribution to African biblical scholarship, it is necessary to define what "African" means for this work. As mentioned earlier, the sheer diversity of languages and tribes in Africa is unrivalled. Consequently, to deliver an authentic African reading one must instinctively define the place and language from which one reads. This study will be using an Akan reading that will utilise cultural practises and proverbs primarily from the Ashanti tribe of the Akan cultural group. Other African scholars may see the similarities between their own cultural groups and the Akan and yet the major variances found within Akan traditional culture also offer an opportunity for a different reflection on the biblical texts. It is for the purpose of highlighting the fertility responsibility and experience of women in the Hebrew narrative that I draw from the proverbs, cultural and religious practises of traditional Akan society.

My Akan biblical interpretation flourishes from a combination of two organic soils: first, my own social location within the Akan cultural group and second, my act of reading alongside other Akan readers. Let me describe the nature and nutrients of the first organic soil. My own social location first sensitised me to the perceived tragedy of infertility, particularly for women. The section on "social barrenness" in this book is a concept that was birthed out of my reflection regarding women's fertility in my cultural heritage. I am an Akan woman. My mother is an Ashanti woman and my father is from the Fante tribe. Per our matrilineal descent system, I belong to the Ashanti tribe following my maternal family. I come from a royal family within the Ashanti tribe and as such a significant part of my socialisation was dedicated to understanding the language, values and rites of my people. My ancestry can be traced back over

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African focus on the present usefulness of the Bible uppermost in their scholarship"; LeMarquand, *An Issue of Relevance*, 15.

85 West, "African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue," 39.

86 West, "African and European Readers of the Bible in Dialogue," 39. Adamo also agrees that African theology "uses African culture and tradition to interpret the Bible in order to shed light on the understanding of the Bible and Africans. While historical-critical methodology is used to analyze the text, the anthropological/sociological method is used to analyze African cultures and situations for the purpose of understanding fully both the biblical text and African tradition"; Adamo, "The Bible in Twenty-First Century Africa," 29.

87 Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa," 16.

four hundred years to Okomfo Anokye, a traditional priest who is the father of the golden stool of Akan.

In addition to drawing from my own social location and heritage it was important to draw knowledge from other Akan readers. I utilised ethnographies, local historians, cultural curators and persons who are journeying through infertility to ensure the reliability and relevance of our interpretation of infertility within this particular context. Yet, my ancestry and heritage enabled me to understand the collective information and knowledge received and how I might relay such information to other non-Akan readers.

Throughout this book there are many references to "the Akan reader" or "the Akan perspective." It is necessary to clarify who this reader is and how this study can make assertions about what this reader could be thinking. As in any culture one cannot stringently assert that *everyone* thinks *exactly* alike *all* of the time. Yet, a person may observe in various cultures certain similarities and commonalities in thought and practise. Reference to "the Akan reader" or "the Akan perspective," rather than a denial of any exceptional circumstances, is a way to underline what a cultural collective may generally agree upon as characteristic of their culture. While the phrase may be singular, "the Akan reader" is not a solitary figure but rather the voice of the collective, the community. Further, the "Akan reader" represents both those who are regarded as experts because of their formal/academic training related to infertility and/or Akan culture, *but also* those whose expertise has been forged from their own personal journey of childlessness. The "Akan perspective," rather than advocating an uncompromising homogeneity, seeks to highlight the fundamental themes that produce the widespread perception that infertility is a trauma and tragedy to be avoided, and resolved, at all costs.

To summarise, the combination of ANE studies, narrative criticism, cultural anthropology and African biblical interpretation is necessary to adequately address the multifaceted experience of infertility. Our multidimensional methodology will uncover the cultural and theological tenor of the narratives. The wom(b)an reading will highlight the centrality of childbirth, and conversely the consequences of infertility, through a comparison of Akan cultural attitudes regarding infertility. Since Akan beliefs regarding fertility and infertility are similar to that of the ANE context, this study proposes that an Akan perspective is a valuable interpretive bridge between Western readings, in which infertility is not viewed so tragically, and the original ANE context, in which infertility is the shame and tragedy of the woman.

In addition to examining biological infertility this book examines "social barrenness." "Social barrenness" is an original term that categorises other kinds of barrenness situations described within the HB. An awareness of the

cultural reality, and varieties, of infertility further elucidates the desperation and lengths to which women in the biblical narratives will go to in order to have children. Conversely, the desolation and shame borne by those who for various reasons are unable to attain wom(b)anhood will also be seen. Further, an appreciation for the cultural dynamics of the narratives will illuminate their theological message(s). This book's cultural-narrative approach coins the new word "wom(b)an" to visually emphasise the centrality of the fecund womb to a woman's identity in the Hebrew and Akan cultures.

CHAPTER 2

(In)Fertility in the Ancient Near East

Women in the ANE admittedly did not wield power in ways that men often did, however their lives expressed another kind of power and influence which, if not contextually and comparatively studied, may be missed by the modern Western eye. Fertility was the power and influence that ancient women exerted. As such fertility was fundamental to the identity of a woman in the ANE, and conversely infertility was a tragic physical and spiritual experience. A survey of selected Mesopotamian, Hittite and Egyptian cultic material, law codes and proverbs provide evidence of attitudes concerning fertile and barren women.

A Culture of Fertility

The widespread rural environment of the ANE meant fertility of the land, animals and human beings were important concerns. A healthy human population was necessary to ensure sustainability and prosperity. Such fertility concerns create a culture of fertility. This culture of fertility can be seen in the ascriptions given to the gods, the fertility cults and rituals that re-enacted the regeneration and sustenance of nature.

If fertility was so fundamental then one may deduce the detrimental effects of infertility. Childlessness is mentioned in various ANE texts. In the cultic material, law codes and proverbs of Mesopotamia, Sumer and Ugarit we see very telling attitudes concerning barren women. The language of barrenness is dominantly negative.[1] Just as in the HB infertility, in these ANE texts, is not commonly ascribed to or thought of as the male's problem.

The desire and expectation for fertility was ingrained into persons from childhood. Evidence of such socialisation will be seen as we investigate the ANE literature. From babyhood until she was married and left for her husband's house, a girl was reared to attain the epitome of womanhood: motherhood. From her household chores, work in the fields and even the veneration of household and national deities, a girl was being trained to be what every woman should be—a mother. In ancient Mesopotamia, the stress was not on

1 An infertile individual was "regarded as being less than a complete human being"; Rooy, "Fertility as Blessing and Infertility as Curse," 225.

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simply becoming a wife, for if a woman got married and could not bear healthy children it brought great disgrace to her, her husband and both of their extended families. The wider ANE context encouraged and expected women to live up to the ideal of motherhood.

Boys were also socialised to prioritise fertility over other "womanly" attributes. More than desiring a woman who would only satisfy sensual pleasures, young men were counselled to desire wives who were "hot limbed," in the sense that she could give birth to numerous children.[2] Indeed, numerous children are also encouraged in this Sumerian proverb, "marry a wife according to your choice! Have children to your heart's desire!"[3] The *Instruction of Ptah-hotep* refers to the wife as "a profitable field for her lord."[4] While this metaphor appears to be only sexual in nature it is closely tied with the conception of a son; a common idea in wisdom writings.[5] Again, similar wisdom is given to a man named Any, in the Egyptian New Kingdom, "Take a wife while you're young, that she make a son for you; she should bear for you while you're youthful, It is proper to make people. Happy the man whose people are many."[6] Reproduction, especially of sons, is tantamount to a happy and fulfilled life.

Due to their labour potential and inheritance rights, it has long been assumed that male children were preferred over and above female children in the ANE.[7] Male children provided security for their mothers when their fathers died, so that the woman would not be a destitute widow. We should not, however, stress the aforementioned point so as to conclude that daughters were irrelevant or entirely unwanted.[8] In fact, some of the fertility figurines found in Egypt from the second millennium BC are carrying either female or male children indicating that "children of both sexes were desired to make up an ideal Egyptian family."[9] Additionally, Hittite ritual texts view both girls and boys as blessings from the gods.[10] Ideally, however, parents would have more sons than daughters so as to ensure labour power, inheritance, and old-age security.

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2 Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 28.

3 Proverb Collection 1, no. 146, Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer*, 29.

4 Wilson, "The Instruction of the Vizier Ptah-Hotep," 345.

5 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 32.

6 Lichtheim, "The Instruction of Any," 111.

7 "May Inanna make a hot-limbed wife lie by you! May she bestow upon you broad-armed sons! May she seek out for you a place of happiness!"; Proverb 147, Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer*, 30. See also, Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 152.

8 Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 253.

9 Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 126.

10 Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 253.

While scholars like Zevit have proposed that "there is no reason to believe that in Israel, or elsewhere, for that matter, there was a neurotic overconcern with conception and viability,"[11] it is the contention of this research that there was much anxiety and concern regarding fertility. This study will be show that women, and occasionally men, went to various lengths in order to secure the blessing of children.

The socialisation affected the religious lives of the people. Ancient Near Eastern religion was largely dominated by fertility deities, rituals and symbols. There was a close association with fertility and the divine. While the connection between fecundity and religious life should not be overstated thereby concluding that everything about Mesopotamian religion was focused on the fertility of the land, animals and humans—it may be proposed that fertility played a major role and was a significant reason for the devotion of people.

To contextualize the divine dimension, or intervention, in fertility matters in the HB we may look at incidences in the ancient Near Eastern worldview. We will shortly encounter texts from the ANE fertility religions that ascribe the deities with powers of giving or withholding children. In such a worldview, then, it is not hard to see why barrenness is interpreted as a curse of the gods and/or visitation by demons.

The divine force behind fertility is exemplified in the Akkadian myth of Ishtar's descent into the underworld.[12] Upon the goddess' departure from earth both animal and humans are robbed of sexual desire and consequently conception and birth cease to happen.[13] The Sumerian version, *the Descent of Inanna*, which predates and is longer than the Akkadian, attests that the god Dumuzi was annually detained in the underworld for six months of the year after which he would resurrect thereby restoring fertility to the earth once more. We see in this legend the beliefs of deities who initiated agricultural, animal and human fertility.

Additionally, hierogamy, the sacred marriage ceremony, was an annual religious ritual in which the King and High Priestess would have sexual relations.[14] This act was intended to re-enact divine copulation and arouse the dormant sexual energies of the gods thus bringing about fertility—human, animal and agricultural.[15]

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11 Byrne, "Lie Back and Think of Judah," 141. Byrne cites Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 273.

12 Speiser, "Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World," 77–81.

13 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 158.

14 Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 494.

15 Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 55–57.

Marriage and Fertility

Marriage was a significant sacrament in Mesopotamia, yet becoming a wife was not enough of an achievement for a woman. A married woman had to become a mother. We learn the necessity of motherhood by investigating the concept of marriage in the ANE. The definition or purpose of marriage in the ANE was a union that perpetuated the husband's lineage. Consequently the pressure was ever on the wife to enter into the stage of motherhood, preferably more than once and with as many sons as well.

Why was the continuation of lineage important? If birth, particularly of sons, ensured the continuation of husband's line, then it also ensured the retention of family land and wealth. So there was not only a social dimension but also a financial incentive for having children. Additionally, the notion that ancestors gained eternal existence in the world through their descendants was also held by many to be true.[16]

Some have further suggested that the compensation-gift given to the bride's family at time of marriage was in fact a "payment for the children to be born of the marriage."[17] The expectation, then, even financial obligation, existed for the bride's family to ensure that she gave birth to children for her husband. An infertile woman would possibly have been regarded as a liability since she would not be providing an heir who could inherit and therefore continue the legacy of the father. Furthermore, if her husband died prematurely, and she had no children she would find herself in a precarious position. Although ancient communities encouraged provisions for widows,[18] children were seen as the best source of financial security.

While the groom's family paid the bridewealth or compensation-gift to the bride's parents, it was the bride's family who gave the dowry to the groom. The dowry was essentially the daughter's inheritance that she would then use to establish her matrimonial home. It is believed that up until children were born into the marriage a woman would be free to take her dowry should her husband divorce her. Significantly, as soon as children were born the dowry was

16 For instance, in Hittite society parents did not only want to be cared for in their dotage but desired that after their death the children would "honor them with rituals, offerings of food and drink, and prayers, thus ameliorating their stay in the afterlife"; Imparati, "Private Life among the Hittites," 574.

17 Burrows, *The Basis of Israelite Marriage*, 53.

18 A king's virtue was partly determined by the provisions that he made for widows and additionally several deities were seen as defenders of widows; Fensham, "Widow, Orphan, and the Poor," 129. See also, Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 319.

incorporated into the husband's property thereby complicating the process of divorce. Now, "the wife had earned the right to a lifelong support in the conjugal household, while her dowry formed part of the patrimony which the children would inherit in due course."[19]

While marriage was an important rite of passage for a woman in the ANE,[20] it seems that childbirth surpassed this as the most important rite of passage. It can be argued that the marriage was not legitimated until the presence of the first child, thus the consummation of the union was not complete until it produced offspring to carry on the father's lineage.[21] Interestingly in the Old Babylonian period a woman often maintained the title of "bride" (*kallatum*) until she gave birth to her first child after which she was known as a wife.[22] Marriage was not enough for a woman, as a Sumerian proverb shows "marrying several wives is human, getting many children is divine."[23] The birth of children, not the consummation on the wedding night, validated the marriage.

Unlike many modern Western marriages, the pressure or expectation for the ANE woman to conceive was apparent even on the wedding night. The Atrahasis epic directs that the wedding night is to be protected by offering up prayers to the goddess Ishtar, the source of love and sensuality.[24] To mark the special occasion the goddess, who was believed to be joyfully present during the consummation, was invoked by the name Ishara.[25] "Under that name the goddess was honoured as the one who brings fertility."[26]

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19 Grosz, "Bridewealth and Dowry in Nuzi," 203.

20 Important rites of passage for females in the ANE are succinctly described by the goddess Gula when she states "I am daughter, I am bride, I am spouse, I am a housekeeper"; Foster, *Before the Muses*, 494. Primary reference in Lambert, "The Gula Hymn of Bullutsa-Rabi," 105–32.

21 Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World*, 107. Tyldesley agrees that in the Mesopotamian context, "the bride was expected to prove herself fertile, the marriage was not a true marriage until conception had occurred, and it was only after the birth of a child that the dowry became payable"; Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 54.

22 Stol, "Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia," 128.

23 Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 192. Also, Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 78. Both Marsman and Toorn follow Gordon's translation; Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, 126. Asher-Greve offer the slightly shorter version, "marrying is human, getting children is divine"; Alster, *Proverbs of Ancient Sumer*, 33. Also, Asher-Greve, "Decisive Sex, Essential Gender," 17.

24 Lines 300–302, Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 65.

25 Line 304, Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 65.

26 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 73.

Typically, a wedding celebration lasted for seven days as family and friends gathered to wish the couple well.[27] There are also instances where the celebrations lasted for two weeks (Tob 8:20; 10:7).[28] There may have also been a nine-day wedding celebration.[29] The subsequent four-months in which the bride continued to reside in her father's house before moving to her husband's family compound "were probably a probationary period, within which conception was to take place."[30] When the newly married woman became pregnant this was seen as confirmation that her marriage and family were indeed favoured by the gods. The conception meant that Ishtar, invoked as Ishara, had delighted in their lovemaking enough to grant the prayer for conception.

Fertility was so foundational to ancient Mesopotamia that methods of contraception were insignificant compared to methods of conception. Conception not contraception was the significant concern. It has been suggested that women used various herbs, roots, bark and even abortion and infanticide as contraceptive measures.[31] Egyptian contraceptive methods included intravaginal applications of crocodile dung,[32] honey and ground acacia[33] believed to block the passage of sperm, thus preventing fertilization. Mostly, contraception, with the exception of breastfeeding,[34] and abortion were effectively seen as criminal with the penalty for abortion, in some cases, being impalement and lack of burial.[35] Since fertility was so sought after it is unclear as to

27 Morgenstern refers to an ancient Bedouin tradition in which weddings are literally called "seven" to indicate the length of the ceremony; Morgenstern, *The Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death, and Kindred Occasions among the Semites*, 107. Also, Stol states that the wedding rites could last anywhere from five to seven days; Stol, "Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia," 489. The seven-day period is attested in the HB; Gen 29:27 and Judg 14:12.

28 Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 34.

29 The following lines from the Atrahasis epic: "At the time for being man and wife, they should heed Ishtar in the marriage chamber, for nine days let there be rejoicing, let them call Ishtar Ishara"; Foster, *Before the Muses*, 238. Foster comments that it is unclear whether the nine days designate the wedding festivities or a subsequent honeymoon.

30 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 73.

31 Teubal, "Women, the Law, and the Ancient Near East," 306. Also, Biggs, "Conception, Contraception, and Abortion," 7–12.

32 Suvorov, "The Kahun Papyrus in Context," 140.

33 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 80.

34 Gruber discusses the contraceptive effect of breastfeeding babies for a few years as well as the prevalent phenomenon of hired wet-nurses in ancient world; Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia," 61–83.

35 Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 28. Also, Imparati suggests that abortion was taken so seriously "because it constituted a crime also against society"; Imparati, "Private Life among the Hittites," 575–76.

how pervasively these contraceptive methods were used. Babies were usually breastfed from birth until three years and this appears to be the more likely form of contraception used.[36] The only group of women who purposefully remained childless were certain classes of priestesses.[37]

The Insecurity of Infertility

The barren wife held a precarious position in her matrimonial home. Husbands could claim the right to marry an additional wife if the first wife was barren, disabled or suffering from another serious illness.[38] On one hand, her lack of children meant she was in danger of either being divorced or losing the favour of her husband to a female slave/concubine. On the other hand, if a wife had children she earned respect and thus marriage contracts from Nuzi forbid divorcing such a wife[39] while the Laws of Ešnunna discourage a quick or easy divorce for a wife who has given birth to children.[40] In Nuzi divorcing a barren wife is not encouraged; however, the husband has allowance to marry a second wife. In rare cases that the first wife was the sole inheritor of her parent's estate, "the prestige attained by the marriage offset the disadvantage of childlessness. A wife of high status could also provide her husband with a slave girl for the purpose of bearing his children."[41] In other marriage contracts from ancient Assyria, a husband is required to wait at least three years of marriage before divorcing his wife if she has not had a child.[42] This set time period reinforces the idea that there was little purpose or salvation for a union that did not produce children and so the husband would be released from his matrimonial commitment.

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36 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 80.

37 "According to legends the gods placed the sexual taboo on some groups of priestesses so as to prevent too great an increase of the population"; Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 28. While Teubal wonders what contraceptive measures the *Entu*, *Naditu* and *Ugbatu* utilised (Teubal, "Women, the Law, and the Ancient Near East," 306), Seibert suggests that the method of contraceptive was "an unnatural intercourse"; Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 28.

38 Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World*, 107.

39 Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," 129.

40 Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," 128–29.

41 Grosz, "Bridewealth and Dowry in Nuzi," 200.

42 Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," 129.

The Laws of Ešnunna (ca. 1770), which predate the Code of Hammurabi by over a century, does not specifically mention the treatment of childless wives.[43] Divorce, however, appears to be an extreme measure which is to be discouraged. As LE §59 states, "if a man sired children but divorces his wife and then marries another, he shall be expelled from the house and any possessions there may be and he shall depart after the one who …, […] the house."[44] This divorce is frowned upon because the man has sired children with his wife. The value and sanctity of the marriage is embodied in the children produced and so divorce is seen as a violation. We are unsure whether to infer from the strict punishment of such a man whether or not this same distaste for divorce would have been present, albeit to a lesser extent, in the case of an infertile wife. Perhaps taking on a second wife would have been preferred over divorce? It is not easy to suggest a definitive answer on the state of childless wives according to the Laws of Ešnunna.

The Code of Hammurabi only permitted a man to marry a second wife in addition to his first wife in three instances: barrenness, serious disease or injury. In all of these instances the wife was to retain her rightful role in the husband's household.[45] If the man insisted on divorcing his barren wife he would have to reimburse the bridal purchase gift and return the bride's dowry.[46] It was financially disadvantageous for the husband, then, to divorce his barren wife and more beneficial to marry a concubine, usually a female slave. In some contexts, a female slave who was able to give birth for her master was esteemed as more valuable than a free woman who was childless.[47] Generally, however, it appears that even when the concubine gave birth to children they would be reckoned as the children of the first wife and would receive the patrimony, the inheritance from their father.

The second wife, regardless of whether she is a female slave or a free woman, shall not claim equality with the first wife.[48] If the second wife, a slave, has borne children then that gives her the guarantee that she cannot be sold on by her husband/master. The law emphasises that she is to remain in her status as

43 Yaron, *The Laws of Eshnunna*, 172.

44 Roth, "The Laws of Eshnunna," 130.

45 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 113.

46 As in CH §138 "If a man wish to separate from his wife who has borne him no children, he shall give her the amount of her purchase money and the dowry which she brought from her father's house, and let her go." In the case that the man had not given any bridewealth for the wife he will compensate her with one mina of gold or a one-third mina of gold depending on his status (CH §139–140).

47 Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 21.

48 CH §145.

slave.[49] The concubine's children were to inherit from their father if he publically recognised them during his lifetime. If this did not happen then subsequent to his death the concubine and her children would not receive any share but instead gain their freedom.[50] If the husband at anytime sells the slave woman, after she has given birth to his children, to a slave-merchant in order to repay his debt, he must return the money to the merchant and is now compelled to free the slave woman because of his action.[51] The value of the slave, then, was determined by her ability to produce children in the case that the first wife was barren.

Further, Hammurabi's code appears to favour the pregnant woman over the non-pregnant woman.[52] In a series of laws it is stated that a man who did bodily harm to a pregnant woman would only be punished and held liable if he caused her to miscarry.[53] If a person did bodily harm to a pregnant woman but she did not miscarry then he was not punished. Teubal interprets this law in the following way, "the welfare of the fetus was placed above the well-being of the woman."[54] The meting out of justice depended on the survival of the foetus, not necessarily on the injury sustained to the woman herself. There exists no similar law stating the penalty for physical harm done to a non-pregnant woman.

The laws of King Lipit-Ishtar of Isin (Sumer) offer the legal protection for wives who were barren. If a husband had a child by another woman he could not cohabit with her until his wife was dead.[55] A different case of Esagil-banata, from the Late Babylonian period, states that if she as a first-wife could not give birth to a son her husband was permitted to marry a second wife. The primacy of Esagil-banata as a wife is evidenced in the stipulation that if she later bore a son he would gain two-thirds of his Father's wealth.[56]

The laws concerning infertile wives show that it was generally frowned upon for a husband to divorce his wife for barrenness. Instead he was permitted to take on another wife, either a free woman or a slave woman. Additionally, the barren wife was not to be despised or given competition by the second and

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49 CH §146.

50 CH §170–171.

51 CH §119.

52 Teubal, "Women, the Law, and the Ancient Near East," 308.

53 CH §209–214. The code gives different penalties depending on the social status of the woman (free or slave) and whether or not the woman lives or dies.

54 Teubal, "Women, the Law, and the Ancient Near East," 308.

55 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 16.

56 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 103.

fecund wife. With children or no children she was to retain her primacy in the household.

Causes of Infertility

What did people throughout the ANE consider to be the causes of infertility? As we look at the extant sources we gather that most of the supposed causes of infertility were supernatural or religious in nature. Past sins; visitation by demons; witchcraft and a refusal to engage in sexual relations were seen as plausible explanations for infertility.

One can discover from the sources that infertility covered a gamut of situations. A woman who could conceive yet not bring the baby to full-term was deemed to be just as infertile as a woman who could not conceive in the first instance.[57] Today infertility is medically defined as the inability to conceive after one year of trying, or six months if the woman is over the age of thirty-five. In contrast, in ancient times the definition of infertility was not restricted to the inability to conceive but included the inability to show your living children. The failure to safely guard and protect one's foetus through the vulnerable weeks and months of gestation would designate an ancient woman as barren, for although she was able to conceive, in the end she had no children to "show" for her labour.

Punishment for a past sin or guilt was seen as the most valid explanation for infertility.[58] One Mesopotamian woman's prayer to the goddess Ishtar reflects such a belief, "may my transgression be forgiven and my guilt be remitted … Give me a name and a descendent! May my womb be fruitful."[59] The woman's plea for forgiveness of her sins may indicate that ancient women would have questioned if they had done something deserving of an ill fate. The added burden of spiritual anguish likely added to the pain of infertility.

Infertility was also seen as a curse that was inflicted on someone who violated or altered the stipulations of a covenant. In the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon the following curse is invoked, "may Belet-ili, the lady of all creatures, put an end to birth giving in your land, so that the nurses among you shall miss the cry of babies in the streets."[60] Covenant violation was regarded as a sin because

57 "Human fertility encompassed the successful conception, birth and rearing of children"; Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 122.

58 Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 242.

59 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 80.

60 Goetze, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon," 221.

the gods were usually invoked to mete out serious punishments, one of which was the self-imposed curse of infertility.[61]

People likely thought that miscarriage and stillbirths were the result of a visitation by demons. Speaking of specific demons that were known to target foetuses and newborns van der Toorn writes, "both figures, Lamashtu and Lilītu, give concrete expression to what seems to be the apparently deep-rooted fear of infertility. They represent the jealous woman without children, counterpart of the happy mother."[62]

This idea that demons could sabotage fertility is attested from earliest to latest records in the ANE. From the late Babylonian period a magic incantation bowl, YBC 2364, tells the story of a female demon, Bguzan-Lilit. Bguzan enters a particular household and changes her appearance so as to seduce the husband. During her seduction she manages to steal the man's semen, apparently while his wife is in the same bed, and then goes on to kill the children in the house. Eventually, Bguzan drives a wedge between husband and wife by creating suspicion that the wife has committed adultery. Convicted of infidelity, the wife must leave the house with her head shaven, clothes ripped and hands over her head, depicting the extent of her shame. Later, the accused wife entreats the intervention of the king of demons and the succubus is expelled from the household but there is a disturbing account of the pregnant Bguzan eating and then burning her unborn child.[63] The story of Bguzan-Lilit is cited to show the prevailing belief, throughout the various periods of the ancient Near East, that demons were responsible for "eating" foetuses and newborns.

While we have already stated that goddesses were believed to be helpers in conception and childbirth, the deities, however, could also wreak havoc and intercept conception and birth. In the hymn *Enlil*, the goddess Nintu kills a child in-vitro thus causing a miscarriage.[64] Additionally, the Atrahasis epic details that at one point the gods became exasperated with the noise pollution of human beings and so invented celibacy, infant mortality and infertility in order to reduce the noise pollution.[65]

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61 "Nintu must deny the violator an heir, not let him receive a name, or let him beget a male descendent"; Rooy, "Fertility as Blessing and Infertility as Curse," 230. Other punishments could be infertility of the land and livestock, see Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One*, 15, and Imparati, "Private Life among the Hittites," 575.

62 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 25.

63 Müller-Kessler, "The Story of Bguzan-Lilit, Daughter of Zanay-Lilit," 193–94.

64 Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 35.

65 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 35.

In ancient Assyria failure to bear children or marry could also bring the suspicion of witchcraft onto a woman.[66] A woman cavorting with demons was seen as incapable of conceiving or carrying a child to full term, since both demons and witches were known to "eat" babies before or at the time of birth.

One possible cause of infertility was that a woman simply refused to have sexual relations with her husband. This probably, however, would have not been a common practise since conjugal rights were expected.[67] Such a refusal was not only thought to be a punishable crime against the woman's husband, but against Sumerian society and its goddess.[68] A wife could not shirk her conjugal responsibilities, "since wives were supposed to produce children, barren wives had no place in Sumerian society."[69]

Just as many of the causes of infertility were believed to be supernatural so to the solutions sought were principally supernatural. This does not mean medical treatments were avoided but that these often went hand in hand with spiritual activity.

The expectations and impact of the culture of fertility weighed primarily on women. The majority of extant sources dealing with the issue of infertility refer to women. On the whole infertility is not presented as the concern, or fault, of the man. There are, however, a few examples that prove to be the exception to this rule.

The ANE Man and Infertility

In earlier ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies the power of fertility was believed to be an attribute of the man, not the woman.[70] Roth proposes that this idea is why some Egyptian deities, associated with fertility, were male or androgynous, the ram-headed Khnum and the Nile god are such examples.[71]

66 Rollin, "Women and Witchcraft in Ancient Assyria," 38.

67 Marsman has found one exceptional judicial ruling that granted a wife the right to refuse her husband sexual relations; Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 131.

68 Kramer, "The Woman in Ancient Sumer," 110. Also, Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 32.

69 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 32.

70 Roth, "Father Earth, Mother Sky," 189. Also see, Biggs, "Conception, Contraception, and Abortion," 2.

71 Roth, "Father Earth, Mother Sky," 190–91. Marsman agrees, "The deities with the power of blessing a couple with offspring were generally male. Although female deities were involved in matters of fertility, they did not occupy a major role. This is the case in Mesopotamia and Egypt as well as Ugarit"; Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 242. However, Marsman's point about goddesses not playing major roles may be an

A woman was not capable of contributing any biological material for fertilization but was the house that protected it. Simply, women's participation in fertility was two-fold: first, the sexual arousal of the males so as to release their fecundity and second, the nurturing of offspring *in vitro* and post-birth.[72] While it may have been the case that women were not believed to contribute biological material to fertilization this did not in any way relieve them from the stigma of not being able to "protect" and deliver the seed that had been implanted. Infertility was largely conveyed as a woman's problem and it was they who often sought divine intervention in the midst of sterility. Still, some exceptional cases exist in which men, feeling the stigma of infertility, take measures to resolve infertility.

One interesting legend is that of Etana, King of Kish in Mesopotamia.[73] Etana is one man who proactively seeks the cure to infertility. Interestingly, he does not attribute or mention his wife as the cause of infertility and furthermore may be willing to accept responsibility for his present situation.[74]

Perhaps the reason why Etana is so proactive and actively engaged in seeking healing for infertility is that he has more to lose than any other man; as a king he must have a successor to carry on his legacy. King Etana seems desperate and appeals for the deity's help on the basis of his blood libations; animal sacrifices; incense offerings; and honour and respect for the gods and spirits. He cries, "O Lord, let the word go forth from your mouth and give me the plant of birth, show me the plant of birth! Remove my shame and provide me with a son!"[75] After this Shamash sends him on a journey and after a series of dreams Etana, with the help of an eagle is able to end his quest. While the text's conclusion is missing it has been assumed that Etana received the plant of birth for his son is listed as his successor in the Sumerian king list.[76]

Another prominent male figure concerned with infertility was King Kirtu of Ugarit. In an attempt to have children he successively marries seven women, all of whom die.[77] For reasons of rebellion, unfaithfulness, difficult labour,

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overstatement as Inanna/Ishtar, Nintu, Ninisina, Nisaba, the *šassūrātu* and Kotharot seem to play prominent roles in fertility. More will be said about these goddesses later.

72 Roth, "Father Earth, Mother Sky," 194.

73 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 189–202.

74 Etana's pleads "remove my shame and provide me with a son"; Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 196. His words show the extent of his concern, and perhaps his willingness to accept responsibility, for infertility.

75 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 196.

76 Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 200.

77 The following summary is taken from Moor, "The Crisis of Polytheism in Late Bronze Ugarit," 12–14.

illness or simply taken by the gods, Kirtu's wives are taken away from him. Due to his childlessness he suffers shame in the eyes of his subjects.

One night the god Ilu comes to him in a vision and promises him great riches. However, this does not make Kirtu happy and he instead appeals for several sons. With divine directives, Kirtu travels to a distant place to marry another wife. So intense is his desperation over not having children that en route he makes a vow to the goddess Athiratu, wife of Ilu. Kirtu promises to give her gold if she will bless him with that which he most desires.

Eventually Kirtu finds a wife and upon bringing her home he invites the gods for a lavish banquet. Locking them all up in his palace Kirtu refuses to let them go until they guarantee the blessing of fertility. Finally, under duress, Ilu blesses Kirtu by predicting the birth of two sons and six daughters.

Oddly, the god adds to the blessing the fact that the youngest daughter will be as the firstborn. Due to the fact that Kirtu did not keep his vow of gold to Athiratu he is struck with a fatal sickness. Ilu, Athiratu's husband, however, intervenes and heals Kirtu but tragedy cannot be completely stayed for Kirtu's children die successively, except the youngest girl. This is Athiratu's revenge against Kirtu for not fulfilling his vow of gold. The best solution to Kirtu's childless state would have been the adoption of one of his brothers as his heir, but they are tragically killed as well. The experience of infertility is enough to bring isolation and make Kirtu shed many tears.[78]

In addition to these two kings, we have the record of Urad-Gula, a physician and exorcist who worked for the kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon. When Assurbanipal ascended the throne, however, Urad-Gula lost his employment at court. Subsequently, Urad-Gula writes a letter of complaint expressing the lack of recognition and reward for his long service.[79] Parpola nicknames Urad-Gula the "forlorn scholar" because of the letter's disgruntled tone.[80] Of note is the fact that he has arranged lavish banquets for the deities at the temple site since this practise indicated piety and was thought to get the favour and blessing of the gods. However, Urad-Gula laments that even though he has done this repeatedly, his wife has still not given birth after five years. Her infertility, in the husband's perspective, is a state of being neither dead nor alive.[81] Interestingly,

78 Moor, *An Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 191–223.

79 The letter first catalogued as ABL 1285 (Harper, Assyrian and Babylonian Letters), has since been edited by Parpola in the State Archives of Assyria volume 10 letter 294; Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*.

80 Parpola, "The Forlorn Scholar," 257.

81 "I have visited the Kidmuru temple and arranged a banquet, (yet) my wife has embarassed me; for five years (she has been) neither dead nor alive, and I have no son" (Parpola, Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars, SAA 10 294 revised lines 23–25).

while Urad-Gula is a Physician and Exorcist, we see here again the close link of medicine and magic in the ancient worldview, he was helpless in the face of his wife's infertility.

Another man who proactively seeks solution for sterility is Danil, of the Aqhat epic.[82] Danil makes food and drink offerings to the gods at the temple. Further, he insists on sleeping there until his petition is granted. On the seventh day Baal compassionately pleads with El, on behalf of Danil, citing that the man has been faithful in giving food and drink offerings and should have children just as his relatives and friends do. Upon receiving a blessing from El Danil departs for home and throws another seven-day feast for the Kotharot who have come to his house. At the end of the feast the goddesses depart and his wife conceives and later gives birth to a special son called Aqhat.[83]

An Egyptian scribe, Nekhemmut, receives a letter in which he is encouraged to adopt but not before he is chided with the following words, "you are not a man since you are unable to make your wives pregnant like your fellowmen."[84] The infertility is boldly attributed to Nekhemmut because he has married more than one wife and it is very unlikely that the wives would all be sterile at the same time. Despite the fact that being a scribe was an esteemed profession, the stance taken in this rebuke is very telling; the manhood or honour of a man will be called into question, or even negated, when he is infertile.

One's station in life was not protection from the tragedy of infertility but it did provide the means through which a person could cope with the infertility. A case in point is the childless couple, the scribe called Ramose and his wife Mutemwia, who lived in Deir el-Medina during the New Kingdom. He commissioned cultic furniture for Osiris and Hathor, deities linked with fertility, but remained without biological children and subsequently adopted his apprentice, Kenherkhepeshef.[85] Another well-to-do man Neferhotep and his wife Webbkhet could not have children so Neferhotep adopted a young man, Hesysunebef, who was formerly a slave.[86] Additionally, Nebnefer adopts his own wife, Rennefer, as his heir because they have been unable to have children

82 Parker, "Aqhat," 49–80.

83 Parker, "Aqhat," 57.

84 This is Wente's translation of Ostracon Berlin 10627; Wente, *Letters from Ancient Egypt*, 149. The letter is dated to the 20th Dynasty during the reigns of Ramses III–IV.

85 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 77.

86 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 77.

of their own.[87] A man's wealth and occupation meant that he could adopt individuals, thereby reversing his status as an infertile male.

The accounts of Etana, Kirtu, Urad-Gula, Danil, Nekhemmut and other well-to-do men suggest that some ANE men did struggle with the experience of infertility, whether or not they saw themselves as the cause yet these examples are few and far between. On the whole, instances of infertility are associated with women. The previous section examined the practise of surrogacy, in which the first wife would gain children through her husband having children with the slave woman or marrying another free woman. Even with this legal and culturally permitted practise women still sought other solutions in order to have their "own" children. We will now look at these solutions.

The ANE Woman's Solutions to Infertility

The ancient world had several tests to determine the fecundity of a woman. Babylonian medical texts regarded the appearance of a woman's breasts and navel as omens indicating her fertility or barrenness.[88] The Egyptian magico-medical papyri contain a significant amount of gynaecology exams for detecting infertility and determining early pregnancy.[89] The *Kahun medical papyrus* focuses on the uterus as the core organ of the body and as such any symptoms or malfunctions of the organs and extremities were linked back to uterine disease.[90] In Egyptian thought, the womb was thought to be central to the health of a woman. One may imagine, then, the status of an Egyptian infertile woman—the central organ of her body was unable to produce and that rendered her a diseased individual. The *Kahun medical papyrus* contains examinations for fertility.[91] A woman was made to sit on a floor covered with date-flour and beer. If she vomited then she would have children—and the number of times she vomited would determine the number of children.[92] Yet another fertility test was inserting a halved onion in the vagina and if the onion scent could be detected on the woman's breath then it indicated her fecundity.[93] The numerous tests used show the haste to know whether or not a woman was fertile.

87 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 77.

88 For further descriptions of these omens see Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 34.

89 Suvorov, "The Kahun Papyrus in Context," 140–41.

90 Suvorov, "The Kahun Papyrus in Context," 138.

91 Iversen, *Papyrus Carlsberg No. VIII*.

92 Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 33.

93 Pinch, *Magic in Ancient Egypt*, 123.

In addition to the literature reviewed above, archaeologists have excavated numerous female figurines that are pregnant, nursing or displaying full breasts. Such figurines span hundreds of years and a number of locations in Mesopotamia.[94] In these places, "there is little doubt that these images were meant to stimulate fertility, to bring about a successful birth and to maintain milk production."[95]

A large number of the figurines excavated lie in the territory of Judah and have been dated to the eighth century BC, just after the fall of Samaria to the Assyrian Empire. While it has been suggested that these figurines are cultic representations of goddesses,[96] others have argued that due to the variety of places in which they were found (graves, houses, waste areas, caves and streets etc.), they may have been non-cultic in purpose.[97] These figurines point to the centrality of fertility and could have been the ancient equivalent of the modern Western baby-doll.[98] It is difficult to be definitive as to whether the statuettes are household gods, play-doll figures for girls, or magical figures or perhaps a combination of all three.[99] Whichever option one chooses, the vast number of these figurines suggests the importance placed on fertility in the ANE.

Fertility figurines have also been discovered from ancient Egypt.[100] Figures of the household deities Bes, Tawaret and Hathor are prevalent since they were seen as givers and protectors of fertility.[101] These excavated household shrines had small figurines often nude but having an exaggerated triangular

94 "The larger artifact family of so-called fertility figurines emerges as early as the Neolithic period in the Near East; it persists through and beyond the Iron Age"; Byrne, "Lie Back and Think of Judah," 148.

95 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 91.

96 For instance, Toorn suggests that the Judean figurines indicate the veneration of mother goddesses by Israelite women; Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 91.

97 Byrne, "Lie Back and Think of Judah," 139. Byrne instead suggests a political reason: these figurines were mass-produced as part of a Judean national campaign, whether formal or informal, to increase their population so as to defy the Assyrian Empire who had devastated and dispersed their sister country, Israel.

98 The Barbie doll is to some extent an indication of what Western media and high-fashion houses deem to be perfect body proportions and beauty expectations. Just as Barbie dolls today are not completely representative of the average woman in the West, it can also be true that these figurines are not meant to be a complete representation of the average woman but rather an idealised image.

99 The latter two suggestions that these statuettes were used as dolls for girls and amuletic figures "are not incompatible"; Capel and Markoe, *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven*, 65.

100 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 57.

101 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 75.

marking designating the genital.[102] Small features and details vary depending on whether they are from the Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom or another period; some figurines are unadorned while others are decorated with jewellery, belts and coiffures.[103] Formerly thought to be "concubine figures," that is figurines buried with Egyptian males so as to perform sexual services and aid in rebirth in the next life, it has now been seen more probable that they are fertility figurines since they are also found in the tombs of Egyptian women.[104] The figurines that have been unearthed at temple shrines are thought to be votive offerings offered by infertile women who were seeking children from the goddess Hathor.[105]

The preference for male children can be seen because many fertility figurines have a child being carried on the hip and suckled on the mother's left breast.[106] These figurines, which are found in funerary, domestic as well as cultic contexts, were used as votive offerings, magico-medical tools, and fertility aids.[107] In their magico-medical usage the figurines were meant to be apotropaic, that is warding off demonic and evil forces, and were used to give protection from snakes and provide relief of stomach aches.[108] This would explain why many of the figurines found were a reddish colour, an evil colour in Egyptian tradition, and were broken, symbolising a breaking of the evil force or malady.[109]

As mentioned earlier, in early ancient Egypt the female role in fertility was to stimulate male potency and then nurture the child.[110] The erotic and fertility dimensions of the figurines, then, may not be separated.[111] Thus, Bodin would rather call them "potency figurines" than "fertility figurines" as this emphasises the erotic prelude to the process of conception and safe parturition.[112]

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102 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 75.

103 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 75.

104 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 75.

105 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 76. See also, Pinch, "Offerings to Hathor," 147.

106 Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 123.

107 Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 126.

108 Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 130.

109 Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 130–31.

110 Budin asserts "fertility is a male attribute; the female component to this fertility is arousal"; Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 134.

111 Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 133.

112 Budin, *Images of Woman and Child*, 134.

Infertile women would make offerings to the gods but when they really wanted to intensify their petition they would make a vow to ensure fertility.[113] As we have seen in the legend of King Kirtu, it was considered a serious offense to vow something or someone to a god(s) and not fulfil it. There were serious consequences, at times fatal, and so a person was usually in dire straits at the point when they made a vow.

In Mesopotamia it is attested that barren women consulted religious figures in order to reverse their misfortune. These diviners would inspect the innards of animals as well as other omens in order to tell the future of the woman. Mesopotamian names such as Ikun-pi-Adad ("The promise of Adad proved reliable") and Iqbi-ul-ini ("He promised it and did not change his mind") are testament to the intervention of the deity in the case of infertility.[114]

In ancient Egypt there was a belief that dead ancestors could help one obtain children. A red earthen vessel with the hieratic handwriting from the First Intermediate Period has been found, and contains a message from a son asking his deceased father to act against two female slaves who were believed to be responsible for causing his wife's barrenness.[115] During the Middle Kingdom a woman places a figurine, with a baby on its left hip, on her father's tomb with the hieroglyphic message "may a birth be granted to your daughter Seh."[116] Evidently, ancestors were revered as offerings were frequently made for them in the domestic shrines. They were also viewed as intermediaries who could plead on behalf of the barren one to the gods so that a child would be given.

To prevent miscarriage, some women wore a birthstone that was a kind of jewel guarded by magic.[117] References to magic amulets and medicinal plants thought to cure infertility have also been found in Old Babylonia.[118] The "plant of birth" (*šammu ša alādi*) is mentioned in the legend of Etana.[119] The jewels and herbs were meant to ward off any evil spirits that might cause miscarriage.

The prevalent belief that deities were responsible for the gift of children is evidenced in this Akkadian prayer, "where you command so the scorned one gives birth to children … whoever has no son you give him an heir. Without

113 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 80. Also, Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 196–97.

114 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 81.

115 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 76.

116 Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt*, 76–77.

117 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 83.

118 Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 35, 53. Some of the remedies for infertility are certainly curious, for e.g. a paste of a powdered dried mouse, myrrh and fat, which is applied as a vaginal cream.

119 Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 53.

you the childless one can receive neither seed nor impregnation."[120] As such women engaged in various prayers and rituals that they believed would bring about the desired blessing. Hittite texts indicating rituals for fertility issues such as "a man's lack of reproductive capacity, a woman's repeated miscarriages, infertility due to a spell, and so on," show the penchant for children.[121] Additionally, in Mesopotamia, the anxiety of not being able to birth living children gave opportunity for certain prayers and rituals to be observed.

A woman who conceives but repeatedly miscarries prays that she will be able to see her baby alive.[122] The end of her prayer is particularly touching, "may I find acceptance in the house wherein I dwell!"[123] The ritual that accompanies this prayer is that she holds a potter's kiln.[124] This is significant because an object being extracted from an oven was a prominent Akkadian birth metaphor.[125] This woman believes the kiln to be the "great daughter of Anu."[126]

Another woman engages in ritual prayer to a date palm tree. She pleads that any sin or misfortune that she has unknowingly brought upon herself will be taken away. Conceiving a child is defined here in terms of productive trees. She describes herself when she says to the deity, "you let the damaged tree produce fruit, you let the non-bearing tree produce fruit."[127] Receiving the answer to her prayer will cause her to sing praises.[128] These prayers and rituals show the dependence that ancient women had on the gods to aid them in their infertility.

Childbirth: A Celebrated Spiritual and Social Experience

Childbirth was a celebrated experience. The divine role in fertility meant that it was deemed to be not only a social event or rite of passage but also a meaningful spiritual experience. Specific celebrations or rituals that surrounded birth may be considered as rites of passage that marked the movement into

120 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 78. So also in, Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 192.

121 Imparati, "Private Life among the Hittites," 575.

122 "But when I conceive, I cannot bring to term what is within me"; Foster, *Before the Muses*, 979.

123 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 979. Original Text: von Weiher SBTU V, 58–61.

124 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 979.

125 Dijk and Geller, *Ur III Incantations*, 23.

126 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 979.

127 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 980.

128 Foster, *Before the Muses*, 980. Original Text: von Weiher, SBTU V, 58–59, 61.

a new phase of life.[129] Not only would a barren woman miss out on the social celebration of motherhood but she would be deprived of the biggest spiritual experience of her life: receiving the blessing of fertility from the gods.[130]

Goddesses were believed to be divine birth attendants directly involved in fertility and childbirth. The magico-medical texts, containing incantations and descriptions of birth, depict the goddesses helping throughout the process.[131] In Old Babylonia, childbirth was seen as a precarious time for mother and baby. The foetus was described as a boat sailing through amniotic waters in order to reach the safe harbour of delivery. The helper who could safely guide mother and child through this turbulent time was Inanna, the mother goddess.[132] There are several other Mesopotamian deities who would come to the aid of labouring women. A Sumerian hymn to the goddess Ninisina declares that her role is to "establish fertility for thousands of girls."[133] The goddess Nisaba is described in the following way: "you place good semen in the womb, you enlarge the birthling in the womb, in order that a mother may love her son."[134] Additionally, the *šassūrātu* were seen as helpers in conception and childbirth.[135] In "The Betrothal of Yarikh and Nikkal-Ib" the Kotharot, daughters of the venerated new moon Hilal, attend the wedding ceremony bringing several gifts, including 'rgz-plants;[136] these plants may have been to aid fertility in the new couple. The Kotharot also emerge to promote conception and childbirth for Danil and his wife, who become the parents of the legendary figure Aqhat.[137] It was believed that goddesses were engaged in the conception even

129 "Many Hittite rituals were rites of passage intended to ease the transition of an individual from one stage or station in life to another"; Beckman, "The Religion of the Hittites," 103.

130 Toorn interestingly proposes that the negative experience of barrenness was also a spiritual journey, a journey which one would not want to travel yet "both parenthood and childlessness were also religious experiences"; Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 78.

131 Some goddesses were involved in "anointing the mother, cutting the umbilical cord, creating a ritual space for the birth, and dealing with the afterbirth"; Bergmann, *Childbirth as a Metaphor for Crisis*, 37. Nintu is one such goddess who is actively involved in fertility and birth; Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 63–65.

132 Farber, "Another Old Babylonian Childbirth Incantation," 311.

133 Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 112.

134 Lines 49–51, Reisman, "A 'Royal' Hymn of Isbi-Erra to the Goddess Nisaba," 360.

135 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 87.

136 Marcus, "The Betrothal of Yarikh and Nikkal-Ib," 215–18.

137 Parker, "Aqhat," 56–57. Column II, lines 24–46. While it is El who pronounces the blessing of fertility on Danil (column I, lines 34–54), it is the presence of the Kotharot that results in Danil and his wife conceiving and birthing their son, Aqhat.

to the delivery of a newborn, and that this divine involvement was coveted and celebrated by women.

The prevailing belief in ANE times was that children were gifts from the gods. Consequently, childbirth was celebrated and reverenced and as such if an ancient woman did not participate in this she was robbed of reverence. Upon entering motherhood a woman was celebrated and conferred with the status of being a wise woman. In Hittite society midwives were celebrated as wise women since they earned the right to assist others at births because they themselves had given birth to several children thereby exhibiting the characteristic of true womanhood.[138] Being able to bring children into the world, and then assist other women in doing so, was highly respected. Conversely, we may deduce the position of a woman who was unable to do either.

Not only were mothers seen as wise women but also in the Hittite culture the blessing of pregnancy is connected with the moon god, *Armas*.[139] The moon-god, often portrayed as a bloody warrior, is a fitting patron of pregnancy and birth since the mother must fight through the challenges of pregnancy and shed blood during parturition.[140] When the mother delivered a healthy child, she was celebrated as one who had endured and won a battle by the aid of the deity.

The celebration of motherhood often involved specific rituals. A Hittite woman's successful delivery was commemorated by a festival of birth. It is recorded that the delivered woman would sit on the birthstool while the priest, her husband and attending women would bow low to her. The birthstool was believed to hold an almost sacred status.[141] Whatever ideological agendas were behind the sacred status of the stool it is evident that the new mother received reverence.[142]

The sacred rituals or celebrations of motherhood abound. The Atrahasis epic designates the sacred house of the *qadištu* as a place where a woman gave

138 Pringle, "Hittite Birth Rituals," 133.

139 Pringle, "Hittite Birth Rituals," 130. The verb *arma* "to be/become pregnant" is identical to the moongod's name, Armas. This is also the same word used to denote the month.

140 "*Armas*, the warrior, plays a symbolic role which signifies the stress and pain of birth-giving, the blood of battle symbolising the blood of parturition"; Pringle, "Hittite Birth Rituals," 131.

141 Pringle, "Hittite Birth Rituals," 139.

142 Pringle suggests that this sacred ascription to the stool may have been an attempt to strongly encourage women to conceive and give birth. "One can scarcely doubt that the taboos and extraordinary, male-controlled, reverence for the birthstool, signified the intense response of a male-controlled society to the power of reproduction"; Pringle, "Hittite Birth Rituals," 140.

birth in Old Babylonia.[143] While this isolation was due to the impure or taboo nature of childbirth it also indicates a kind of sacred space and stage into which the woman had entered.[144] Here a line of sprinkled flour was drawn around the woman in labour and this magical circle ensured "a separation was created between the secular world outside and the consecrated ground inside the circle. We may infer from this that the screening off of the woman giving birth from her environment was considered to be of fundamental importance."[145]

While the patriarchal nature of ANE cultures may not be dismissed, it is also undeniable that motherhood was perceived as an exalted status. This was true from the cult to the domestic arena. The goddess Isis, the sister-wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, played a prominent role in ancient Egyptian mythology. The mother of the Egyptian King held great respect in society and in everyday life the "heroic mother" was often given more prominence than the "loyal wife."[146] Often widowed mothers had more influence in their sons' households than their daughters-in-law.[147]

In this Egyptian context maternal relatives were regarded as more significant than paternal relatives.[148] This was so much so that in autobiographical works men list that they "did not defame mother" as one of their virtues.[149] Of note is the phenomenon that "the most frequent parent mentioned in dedicatory inscriptions and autobiographical texts is the mother."[150]

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143 There is some difference of opinion as to the translation or description of the *qadištu*. Lambert and Millard translated this as "prostitute"; Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 63. While Foster prefers the term "sacrosanct woman"; Foster, *Before the Muses*, 238. I will not deal here with the debate as to whether this temple functionary offered sexual services to worshippers at cultic sites, for a summary see Roth, "Marriage, Divorce, and the Prostitute in Ancient Mesopotamia," 23–24. It is attested in several texts that the *qadištum* were also paid by wealthy people to be wet nurses and that this may indicate that, whatever the extent of their sexual services, they were not seen as shady or immoral figures; Lerner, "Origin of Prostitution in Ancient Mesopotamia," 242–43.

144 Toorn aptly expresses the dual nature of childbirth, at once holy and impure: "as one who brought forth life she inspired a holy awe, as one impure she was avoided like a leper"; Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 86.

145 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 85.

146 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 27.

147 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 48.

148 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 27, 37.

149 Depla gives the opposite of this virtue being the sacrilegious behaviour of lying against one's mother, this was frowned upon deeply; Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 40.

150 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 37–38.

In literature from the Pharaonic period we find that the mother, instead of the father, was regarded as more influential in relation to the education and marriage of her daughter than was her father.[151] Furthermore, it has been attested in some Egyptian wills and deeds that children, of both genders, could inherit property and offices from their mothers.[152]

The importance of the female line is consistently evident in Egypt, numerous dedicatory inscriptions to mothers have been found in the tombs of Egyptian males.[153] Indeed, motherhood was no ordinary phase but was regarded as "the pinnacle of female achievement in the eyes of society. Mothers were regarded as paragons."[154]

In ancient Egyptian society a wife's function was to bear children and nurture them; therefore "childlessness could be grounds for divorce,"[155] except if the husband could adopt,[156] and in some cases men adopted their wives so as to bequeath their entire estate to them upon death.[157] Pregnancy was so expected and pervasive that it was often the leading cause of high female mortality rates.[158] Often, couples would have to endure giving birth to twice the amount of children that they wanted to survive.[159] Even if women survived

151 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 30.

152 For instance, Akhethotep inherited the position of Overseer of Physicians from his mother, Pesset; Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 37–38.

153 Tyldesley compares this with several African cultures that reckon descent through the female line as well as the male line. He notes that this would have been very helpful in protecting women and ensuring their respect; Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 40. It will be helpful to see in the next chapter how the Akan tribal group of Ghana also reckons descent through the mother's line.

154 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 31.

155 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 48.

156 It has been noted that adoption was not an option for all ANE couples. For instance, Galil looks at case studies of childless couples in the Neo-Assyrian period that had to remain in their situation since it was only the middle or upper classes who could afford to pay the birth parents a certain fee in order to adopt; Galil, *The Lower Stratum Families in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, 302–03.

157 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 48. The adoption papyrus to which Depla refers, was first translated by Alan H. Gardiner; Gardiner, "Adoption Extraordinary," 23–24.

158 Additionally, "the problem of fertile but physically immature children themselves becoming mothers must have contributed to the high levels of infant and maternal mortality during pregnancy and childbirth"; Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 51.

159 "Even without an epidemic, families would have had to produce almost twice the number of children they wanted in order to achieve optimal family size"; Willett, "Infant Mortality and Women's Religion in the Biblical Periods," 81.

multiple pregnancies, preserved corpses of ancient Egyptian women show that they "had an average life expectancy of approximately forty years."[160]

While fertility was a duty it is said that "the Egyptians were a very uxorious race," so that the emphasis on fertility did not necessarily mean marriages were devoid of companionship.[161] This uxoriousness, however, may have been jeopardised if a woman could not meet the expectation of motherhood. For it is true that "tradition and biology combined to ensure that marriage followed by motherhood would be the inevitable career-path for almost all Egyptian women."[162]

The Consequences of Infertility

Childlessness was a negative experience for the ancient woman. In the rare circumstances that women had access to their own wealth and social power, the fear of being divorced or disgraced on account of infertility was not overwhelming; however, they were still expected to become mothers by way of surrogacy and adoption. The only class of women for whom childlessness was acceptable were the *naditu*, a class of priestesses who were consecrated to childlessness so as to give full attention to their sacred vow.[163] If a *naditu* were married, then her husband was permitted to take an additional wife to bear him children.[164] In contrast, the typical ancient woman endured the consequence of infertility: a loss of honour.

Loss of Honour

In ancient Mesopotamia the worldview of honour-shame was pervasive. In summary, this worldview conveys the idea that the behaviour of ANE citizens was fundamentally determined by a quest for honour and a desire to avoid shame. Honour was ascribed not only to an individual but to his/her family and community. Thus, if one person "earned" honour, then the honour reflected on the whole family, and conversely if one person was shamed that too reflected on the family or group with which the person was associated. While

160 Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 30. For further details on infant mortality and female lifespan see Willett, "Infant Mortality and Women's Religion in the Biblical Periods," 79–81.

161 Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 46.

162 Tyldesley, *Daughters of Isis*, 46.

163 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 80.

164 Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 126.

anthropologists have long espoused this paradigm in ancient life,[165] HB scholars have not widely interpreted through this cultural paradigm.[166]

Fundamentally, "honor and shame communicate relative social status, which may shift over time … It is a commodity of value, actively sought both by deities and by human beings … Honor is meant to be recognized and acknowledged; it is very much a public phenomenon."[167] It has been proposed that the worldview of honour-shame did not exist in the same way for women as it did for men.[168] Underlying this proposition is the assumption that honour was always publically ascribed, therefore women, who lived in the private sphere, did not concern themselves with this because they were not, willingly or unwillingly, part of the public sphere. Rather, women subscribed to a culture of shame, which was the female equivalent of the honour that men searched for in the public sphere.[169] A woman's sexual purity, whether as a virgin or faithful wife, was her "positive" shame, the only honour that she possessed.

Nonetheless, the dichotomy between private and public spheres in ancient life has been countered as being a false dichotomy.[170] As such the usage of "honour" for men, and "positive shame" for women, may not be as beneficial as suggested. Women were not completely removed from the public sphere and were perhaps as concerned with obtaining honour as men were.[171] Even more than being a wife, a woman's fertility in marriage was the way she could obtain honour. Failure to produce children was sure to leave her without prestige and social status.[172] The loss of such honour would have been a concern for a barren woman.[173] We will examine shortly the ways in which the women in the Hebrew barrenness narratives sought honour through fertility.

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165 See Peristiany and Pitt-Rivers, *Honor and Grace in Anthropology*.

166 Olyan gives surprising statistics as to the scholars who have recognised this cultural paradigm at work in the HB and they make up a minority; Olyan, "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations," 202–03.

167 Olyan, "Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations," 204.

168 For a summary of this thought see, Rabichev, "The Mediterranean Concepts of Honour and Shame," 51–63.

169 "Thus, in this system, a woman of shame is the status equivalent of a man of honor"; Brayford, "To Shame or Not to Shame," 163.

170 Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 173–75.

171 "More examples of women being aggressive in public, and in some cases competing with men for public approval, are found in ancient Egyptian letters"; Crook, "Honor, Shame, and Social Status Revisited," 606.

172 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 77.

173 "Specifically, wives who are barren negatively impact a husband's honor"; Brayford, "To Shame or Not to Shame," 165.

Economic Strain

In addition to the loss of honour, a childless woman in the ANE was also at risk of economic disadvantage. An ancient woman may have been at risk of impoverishing her economic resources while trying to find a cure or solution to her circumstance. Some medicinal herbs may have been affordable but magic amulets and ornaments may have come at a higher price.[174] For instance, one magico-medical text prescribes "21 stones to help a barren woman become pregnant; you string them on a linen thread and put then around her neck,"[175] such a necklace may have come at considerable cost. A woman who was willing to go to great lengths in order to have a child may have exhausted several options that will result in economic loss for her and her husband.

In ancient Mesopotamia it appears that the bridewealth, given to the bride's family at the time of marriage, was understood as a "payment for the children to be born of the marriage."[176] Such an understanding makes sense in a culture where the birth of children ensured the continuation of the husband's lineage and the retention of land and wealth in the family. Brides in this context, then, probably felt some responsibility in ensuring the continuation and financial prosperity of their husband's household. Therefore, a childless woman may have been seen as one who endangered her husband's property and financial prospect because she could not give him children to inherit that property and wealth.

Childless women faced the challenge of a lack of financial support in their dotage, especially in the case of widowhood. In a patrilineal context, if a woman's husband died she was not only in danger of being left without his financial aid but also of losing her dowry, which would be absorbed into his estate. A woman was only able to access or manage her dowry "once she had given birth to children."[177] Consequently, if a woman did not have children then her dowry could be absorbed into her husband's estate that would then be taken over by his next of kin.

Children, particularly, sons were seen as the best source of economic and financial security.[178] For women, then, there was economic and financial in-

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174 Cf. 2.7 where solutions for infertility are discussed. A childless couple could have incurred considerable cost in consulting religious figures, buying magic jewellery and herbs as well as religious offerings and vows.

175 Biggs, "Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health in Ancient Mesopotamia," 9.

176 Burrows, *The Basis of Israelite Marriage*, 53.

177 Matthews, "Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East," 14.

178 This preference for sons is subtly subverted, at least for a while, in the Naomi-Ruth narrative. In this story it is Ruth, in the place of Naomi's deceased sons, who works together with Naomi to ensure their economic security through Boaz.

centive for having children. Later, we will see both the economic disadvantage of childlessness and the security of fertility in the Naomi-Ruth narrative. Economic concern, however, was not the only challenge with which barren women had to contend.

Emotional Consequences

The Hebrew infertility narratives are terse in regards to describing emotions or inner feelings of its characters. As such we rely mostly on the actions of characters to deduce and make assumptions about what they must have been feeling. The narrative within the barrenness tradition which has the most emotional description is that of Hannah (1 Sam 1–2). Ancient childless women likely faced a considerable amount of emotional turmoil. In a community-focused culture, a childless woman's emotions probably depended not only on her domestic situation but also on how other people in the community behaved towards her. Soon we will see in the Rachel and Leah's narrative that emotions such as jealousy can compound the challenge of infertility. If indeed childbirth was a celebrated social and spiritual experience for the ANE woman, then it is likely that a childless woman would have experienced considerable emotion from not having access to such an experience.

Conclusion

The tragedy ascribed to infertility in ANE life stems from the importance placed on fertility, whether human, animal or land fertility. This culture of fertility is evident in the beliefs and cult practises for major deities who were essentially fertility gods. In such a context, barren women and widows become marginal figures for they "neither contribute new human life to their families and to society—whereas pregnant women represent survival."[179] Surveying the various social and spiritual meanings attached to conception and childbirth, we conclude that childbirth was a life-stage to which ANE women aspired. Childbirth may, in no exaggerated terms, be described as the apex of an ANE woman's spiritual life.[180]

While extant ANE sources record several male figures that proactively sought solutions to infertility, whether or not they attributed the sterility to their wives or themselves is not always clear, infertility was commonly thought of as being a woman's burden. Since marriage was seen as a union to perpetuate the lineage of the husband, a woman's children brought her honour for

179 Meyers, "Barren Woman," 200.

180 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 92.

she had fulfilled her duty to her husband, extended family and community. Conversely, "childlessness meant not only social defeat but, in common opinion, displeasure on the part of the gods. The woman would readily undergo all the trouble and inconvenience of confinement to avoid that fate."[181] The actions that women would take in order to solve their infertility include making ambitious vows to the gods, enduring the conflicts possible in polygyny, bearing social shame, and taking various herbal remedies.

An understanding of the ANE emphasis on the divine dimension of fertility provides an appropriate background for which to better appreciate the HB portrayal of Yahweh as the womb-shutter and womb-opener. In the upcoming chapters we will explore the narratives of several barren women and examine the reasons behind, and the solutions sought for, their unfortunate circumstances.

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181 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 92.

CHAPTER 3

(In)Fertility in the Akan Culture

We have seen in the previous chapter that in the larger ANE context childbirth was central to a woman's identity. This section will suggest that beliefs regarding fertility and infertility are similar in Akan culture, and that such a culture may serve as a bridge between a Western context, in which infertility is not viewed so tragically, and the original ANE context, in which infertility is a shameful and tragic condition. The examination of infertility in Akan may help to further highlight the situation and solutions sought by women in the Hebrew narratives. The word "wom(b)an" is useful to underscore the centrality of the womb to a woman's identity in Akan culture.

"Akan" designates a major group of tribes within Ghana, West Africa. Within the Akan cultural group are subgroups such as the Ashanti, Ahanta, Akyem, Akuapem and Fante tribes. This study draws primarily from research on the Ashanti tribe, a dominant group within the Akan cultural group that has a strong matrilineal structure.

Abusua (family) in the Akan group of Ghana is reckoned through matrilineal descent. In such a context, a childless woman is pitiable. There is a Twi proverb "*wunni ba a, due*," which means if a woman does not have a child she is to be consoled.[1] Not only is the barren woman pitied because of her individual experience but also she is pitied as one who is regarded to be a threat to the continuity of the family and larger community.

Akan society is traditionally oral in nature. Proverbs are not only used to communicate truth but also to reinforce valued behaviour and discourage negative behaviour, known as taboos. In this culture, proverbs concerning children emphasise the centrality of childbirth and the shame of infertility. In the present chapter, several proverbs will be explored which underscore such beliefs.

Defining *Abusua* (Family)

To contextualise our discussion of fertility, we may first look at the structure and function of the family in Akan culture. The extended family, known as

1 Asare-Opoku, "Procreation in Africa," 108. Throughout the rest of this section all foreign words italicized are Twi words unless otherwise indicated. Twi is one of the major languages within the Akan cultural group.

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abusua in the Twi language, is of primary importance.[2] The Ashanti understanding of the nature of human beings (*ɔdasane*)[3] is important to examine in our discussion of fertility and infertility. Every human being (*ɔdasane*) has a threefold nature: the *ɔkra* (soul) which is given by God, *sunsum* (spirit) given by the father to protect you and *mogya* (blood) given by your mother. The father's role is to protect while the woman's role is to replenish the family.

In contrast to the patrilineal and double-descent tribes of Ghana,[4] the Akan describe family as "the man's mother, his maternal uncles and aunts, his sisters and their children, and his brothers. A man's children and those of his brothers belong to the families of their respective mothers."[5] Every matriclan is led by an elderly male (*abusuapanin*) and an elderly female (*ɔbaapanin*).[6] Throughout his or her life an individual is inextricably linked to their matrilineage.[7]

Women are important in Ashanti society because of the matrilineal system.[8] The births of daughters are celebrated just as much as, if not more than, sons. It is through women that God perpetuates generations and so men are taught the importance and uniqueness of women.[9] However, in some families sons were often mollycoddled and traditionally were the ones sent to formal schools. It was hoped that when the sons were established they would look after the interest of the parents.

There is an Ashanti saying that only a mother really knows who her children are.[10] Reckoning descent and inheritance by the bloodline of the mother is meant to keep inheritance disputes at bay. Therefore, a man's sister's children

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2 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 83–84.

3 It is helpful to provide a brief pronunciation guide for the Twi words included in this chapter. The "ɔ" is a short "o" vowel in Twi and is akin to the British English ɒ "gɒt" as in "got." Additionally, the vowel "ɛ" is a short "e" vowel and is akin to the British English "e" in "ten."

4 Such as the Ewe and Dagbane tribes. The Fante tribe are probably the only tribe within the Akan cultural group that can be described as somewhat patrilineal. Anthropologists explain this divergence from the Akan norm as being a result of an increased interaction with European colonialists. Since the Fante mainly reside on the coast of southern Ghana they have had more interaction and influence from the European colonists beginning in the eighteenth century.

5 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 90.

6 Akyeampong and Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power," 488.

7 Aborampah, "Women's Roles in the Mourning Rituals," 261.

8 Akyeampong and Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power," 488.

9 It is believed that most of the taboos in Ashanti culture are for the protection of women.

10 This is not indicative of a promiscuous society in which fathers do not know if they are really biological fathers. Rather, it emphasises the cultural importance given to women despite the allowance for polygyny; such a proverb makes people aware that while women

are esteemed as much as, if not more than, his own children since biologically they may share more relation to him than his wife's children.[11] There is the belief that nothing is thicker than the *mogya* (blood) of the mother. Indeed, "the father's role in physiological or blood relationship is in theory subordinated to the more socially vital use of *mogya*, namely: descent-reckoning, which is focused on the mother."[12] Kinship as exemplified in the matrilineal system is very essential in Ashanti custom.

Yet, a significant difference exists between the ANE and the Akan context. For the most part the ANE context promoted patrilineage, inheritance determined by the father's line of descent. Differently, Akan inheritance is determined by the mother's line of descent. It is important, however, to distinguish between matrilineality and matriarchy.[13] Matriarchy denotes overt power in political and societal spheres while matrilineality is more specific to power in settling inheritance and lineage matters. While Akan culture is matrilineal it is often the men who take on overt leadership positions.[14]

Ancient Israel was a patriarchal and patrilineal society; however, matrilineal undercurrents exist in that women fought for legacy and security through children in the society based on the בֵּית אָב (*bet 'ab*, the house of the father). Similarly, while Akan culture is patriarchal it is simultaneously matrilineal. It is possible to have a cultural system publicly led by men but greatly influenced by women in matters such as inheritance and kingship. In the Ashanti tribe, of the Akan cultural group, the role of crowning the king is not given to the cultic leaders, or to any other male but to *ɔhemmaa* (the queen mother). She is the most revered royal member and major decisions are not made without her consultation.[15] A queen mother is thought to be more powerful than the king himself.[16] In non-royal families this pattern still exists in that the eldest woman of the family is usually consulted for wisdom when it comes to making decisions

may not be primary heirs to property and material inheritance the legacy of children can never be taken away from them.

11 Chukwukere, "Akan Theory of Conception," 144. Further, "he is morally impelled to care for them because they ensure the continuation of the lineage segment sprung from his mother"; Fortes, "Time and Social Structure," 23.

12 Chukwukere, "Akan Theory of Conception," 144.

13 Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 37–38.

14 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 83–84.

15 A famous Queenmother in Ashanti history is Nana Yaa Asantewaa, in 1900 she led an army against the British colonists in what has come to be known as the War of the Golden Stool.

16 Akyeampong and Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power," 488.

but it is the men that are seen to exert more public influence.[17] Understanding the matrilineal nature of Akan society can then shed light on the gravity of childlessness in a traditional culture, thus enlightening the ancient stories of the barren wives.

The Purpose of Marriage

Customary or traditional marriage in the Akan culture is defined as a covenant between the two families. Due to the involvement of families in the marriage of their children, people were encouraged to marry within one's tribe and in close proximity to the family home.[18] The marriage rite was greatly esteemed as it is seen as a sign of divine favour and family honour.

Another significant reason exists as to why marriage is essential in many African cultures; it is seen as the only proper context for birthing and rearing children.[19] For the Akan, childbearing is central to a woman's identity.[20] Since fertility is not seen as a personal or private matter but as a benefit to the larger community, regular prayers are offered for those who seek children.[21] While not seen as the woman's fault in every case, barrenness still remains the burden of the woman. The underlying reason for this is the matrilineal nature of Akan society.

The purpose of marriage is the perpetuation of the matrilineage. As such there is familial expectation that the newlyweds will commence the process of conception immediately. Childbirth is the indicator of a blessed marriage and so conversely the marriage is considered cursed if no children are born.[22] During the customary marriage rite the proverb is stated "if the woman gains something she is bringing it home,[23] if she incurs cost it is her husband that bears it." Any cost incurred while raising the children is seen as the

17 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 90.

18 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 100.

19 Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness'," 438.

20 Prominent Ghanaian Theologian Mercy Oduyoye describes how non-Western cultural expectations further complicate reproductive loss. Oduyoye describes how she had to face the reality of infertility and embraced and found hope in mothering her mentees and students, as she would have her own children; Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself," 105–20.

21 In the larger Western context fertility is largely a private matter between couples. However in African religious contexts prayers are often offered by and on behalf of those who are seeking children. For example, when a child is dedicated or christened in a Ghanaian Christian church the Pastor will often end the service with a special prayer for those in the congregation who desire to one day present their children before God.

22 Gadzepko, *History of Ghana since Pre-History*, 80–81.

23 "Home" being synonymous with her matrilineage not her husband's house.

responsibility of the man even though the children "belong" to the woman and her matrilineage.

In such an environment, if a woman gets married and does not give birth it signals great trouble. Interestingly, however, in Ashanti it is not unthinkable for the man to be suspected as the cause of infertility. In a culture where infertility is usually seen as a woman's problem, it is interesting to find that male infertility, when suspected, also carries a great deal of shame. In fact, there is a name used to deride men who are infertile, *kote krawa*, literally "wax penis."[24] Captain Robert S. Rattray, the earliest ethnographer to write about the Ashanti, reported that at a funeral the deceased had thorns pierced into the soles of his feet while the following words were said over him, *wonwo ba, mma saa bio* ("you have not given birth to children, do not return again like that").[25]

Additionally, it was possible in this traditional society, for a woman's family, after seeing that she had not given birth after a few years of marriage, to return the bridewealth and gifts that the man gave to them in order to contract the marriage, so that they could look for another man for her to marry. In some cases the husband is given a deadline of sorts to impregnate his wife. There are some folk traditions about husbands who really could not bear the thought of losing their beloved wives and so together the couple would hatch a plan. The plan may be for the wife to secretly procure a male surrogate and be impregnated in this way. The conflict or tension in the plot would be if the baby closely resembled its biological father and thus betrayed the circumstances of his conception and birth. Male surrogacy, then, was a risky and not popular solution.

If the husband failed to meet the ultimatum he would be forced to divorce his wife. The chief concern of the family is that the woman must bear children to perpetuate the matrilineage. This is only done if the family suspects that it is more likely that the man, not the woman, is the cause of infertility. Such suspicion may be strengthened by consulting diviners or perhaps based on the assumption that no other woman in the family is infertile so this woman is less likely to be the cause of infertility.

Typically, however, it is the woman who is suspected of infertility. Thus, if a married woman does not get pregnant after several years of marriage she is seen as labouring in vain. There is a folksong called *ma brɛgu* that tells the story of a childless lady called Akosua Kuma. Akosua Kuma states *ma brɛgu* that means, "I have laboured in vain." Mr Osei Kwadwo, Curator for Manhyia Palace Museum,[26] recalls that this folksong was sung during the time when

24 Sarpong, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 7.

25 Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 67.

26 Manhyia Palace is the official residence of The King of Ashanti (*Asantehene*) in Ghana.

little children would sit around the fire to be told stories and taught lessons. We can see, then, that from an early age children are taught about the tragedy of infertility.

Rites of Passage

The Akan group of Ghana have significant beliefs regarding fertility and infertility. These attitudes have been passed on through proverbs, folk stories, taboos, rituals, music and art. It will be seen that Akan culture, in particular the Ashanti tribe, holds fertility as vital and infertility as a tragedy. In order to prove this thesis we will look at rites of passage in Akan context.

French anthropologist Van Gennep coined the term "rite of passage" in 1960.[27] The term describes "a ritual complex which demarcates the transition of an individual from one clearly defined status within a social structure to another."[28] Cultures, through tradition and socialisation, construct specific ceremonies of recognition for its members as they move from one passage to the next. Anthropologists have observed that in most cultures birth, puberty, marriage and death are considered the most important rites of passage. Two significant rites of passage in many African cultures surround the birth and naming of a child.[29]

In traditional Ashanti culture marriage is only regarded as the most significant rite of passage when children are born.[30] Amoo rightly underscores the importance of children, even apart from their family circumstance and

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27 "The life of an individual in any society is a series of passages from one age to another and from one occupation to another"; Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 2–3.

28 Whitekettle, "Leviticus 12 and the Israelite Woman," 399. Characteristically, rites of passage are divided into three stages: separation, liminality or transition and the final stage of reintegration.

29 Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christianity and the African Rituals of Birth and Naming," 40. In the Kenyan context there are rituals performed for and by the woman during pregnancy (42–45).

30 We can see this in Bartle's analysis where he states that the most significant rite of passage is motherhood. In fact in his description of rites of passages he does not list marriage. "Rites of passage apply to (a) birth or migration from *asamando* (land of dead), (b) puberty or change from asexual child to adult female (no male rites: a boy becoming a man when his father gave him a gun and wife), (c) bringing forth or becoming a mother, (d) possession or becoming a priest or priestess, (e) enstoolment or becoming a chief or elder, and (f) death or migration back to *asamando* to become an ancestor or common ghost"; Bartle, "The Universe Has Three Souls," 103.

background when he writes, "Every child has a place in the *abusua* (clan) even though it may be born out of wedlock, i.e. without the transference of *aseda*. It is cared for and has legal rights of inheritance. The unmarried mother loses social status, but not the child."[31] The unwed mother while losing status for not getting the honour of a dowry may still be more esteemed than a wife who remains childless. Next, we will look in chronological order at the three important rites in a female's life: her naming ceremony, puberty rite and motherhood.

***Naming Ceremony* (Abadinto)**

A significant rite of passage is the naming ceremony known as the outdooring, *abadinto* in Twi. The ceremony is observed eight days after the birth of a child. The naming ceremony of a child is considered to be the reincorporation of the mother and the infant.[32] The ceremony, called outdooring because this is the first time that the baby is introduced to the outside world and people, is performed in early morning of the eighth day.

While inheritance is reckoned by matrilineal descent, the father is the one who gives names to the children. The reasoning behind the practise is that because men do not give birth they are given the power of naming so that the man's family name will not be lost. Another reason that the Fante, another subgroup of the Akan, give for the father's dominance in naming is so that he publically recognises and accepts paternal responsibility from that day forward.[33]

To mark the occasion the husband gives his wife various gifts (*tanfi*) like *Kente* cloth, jewellery and cosmetics. Babies are often given names of significant relatives, living or deceased, for the belief is that they will then inherit some of the positive characteristics of that individual.[34] However, a man may not name his first child after his father because the belief is that he will not be able to have more children. Typically, a man will give his first child a variation of his own mother's name. Even if the child is a male he will have a masculine form of his paternal grandmother's name. Whoever the child is named after also gives presents to the baby. Names are believed to have prophetic power and so names are deliberated over so as to choose wisely the future shape of the child's character.

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31 Amoo, "The Effect of Western Influence on Akan Marriage," 228. The *aseda* that is referred to is literally translated "thanksgiving" and refers to the wealth or dowry that a man gives to his betrothed's family as a signal of gratitude.

32 Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 14.

33 Chukwukere, "Agnatic and Uterine Relations," 62. The Fante are one of the tribes making up the Akan group.

34 Bartle, "The Universe Has Three Souls," 101.

Special names are given to outline the circumstance of the actual birth or family situation in which the child arrives. For instance, a posthumous child who did not meet his father is called *Anto* or *Antobam*. The theophoric name *Nyamekyɛ* (a gift from God)[35] is usually given to a child whose mother struggled before being able to have children. *Afriyie* is the name given to a child who is born during a good or successful time. Other names such as *Densu*, *Tano*, *Afram*, *Pra* are names of local shrines given to babies to convey that they are answers to supplications made in those places. Sometimes the child is named after the festive time during which they were born, for example *Adae* (*Adae* festival), *Fordwoo* (*Fordwoo* festival), or *Bronya* (Christmas).

***Puberty Rite* (Bragorɔ)**

Puberty rites are only observed for girls in the Akan society. The puberty rite serves to reinforce traditional values and ideals.[36] One significant value imparted to girls is that of purity, which is defined as sexual abstinence before marriage and fidelity in marriage.[37] Before the *bragorɔ* rite commences the queen mother of the traditional area receives the young female initiate for a visit. The female initiate is called *Brani* or *Sakyima*. The primary reason for this visit was so that the queen mother could inspect the female initiate. The inspection, which included a breast exam and other things, was intended to prove that the girl really was menstruating.[38]

Upon confirmation of her menstruation the initiate would be taken to one of the peripheral houses designated for menstruating women. At this time she would be fed a diet of *ɛtɔ* (mashed yam) and eggs to mark her transition into womanhood.[39] During her time of separation, before the communal celebration, the young lady is taught all she must know about womanhood. Topics such as prospective suitors, married life, cooking and childcare are discussed. This rite is so significant that in Ghanaian traditional law a woman was forbidden to marry until she had been initiated in this way.

On the first day the young lady must undergo a ritual washing by designated women in the local stream or river.[40] In this process some items are thrown into the body of water as offerings to the water-spirits. Such items may include

35 "The immediacy of God in African affairs is also demonstrated through the God-related names we bear"; Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God," 497.

36 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 92.

37 Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 15–16.

38 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 13.

39 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 13.

40 Sarpong, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 29.

ɛtɔ (mashed yam), an egg, three *edwono* leaves and sometimes the cut hair and nails which have been cut.

After being washed, the initiate is dressed and then seated on a stool by an elderly woman. The older woman must be one who has given birth to many children. The act of being seated on the stool three times mimics the enthronement of the queen mother. A basin filled with water and green leaves is placed next to the initiate. This water mixture is sprinkled on the girl and is supposed to protect her from barrenness. Besides her is an egg and okra vegetable, which are symbols of fertility. Libation is made to thank the gods and ancestors for the girl's arrival to puberty.

Next, the manner in which the young lady is dressed and adorned signals the important transition. There is a ritual cutting of the girl's nails and she is given a special haircut called *dansinkran*, a haircut that only Ashanti queen mothers wear. The young lady is clothed in a special cloth called *Kente* and given new sandals and beads for adornment. The garment signalled nubility and purity. An initiate going through the puberty rites is dressed in a special white cloth to signal her special status within the community.[41] The white cloth is to signal that she is sexually mature for marriage but has retained the pure status of a virgin. It is also during this time and shortly afterwards that the family of the initiate is approached with marriage proposals.

A part of the puberty rite is called *anoka* which means "tasting." The following items are made to touch the young lady's lips: boiled egg, mashed yam, elephant skin, banana and roasted groundnuts. All these items have specific proverbs and prayers that go along with them. During the *anoka* prayers are offered that the young lady may gain all she needs for her journey of womanhood.

While her family and the community are watching the initiate must swallow a whole boiled egg without biting or chewing. The egg represents fertility so it is believed that if she bites or chews it then she will be barren. This is why it is not uncommon for barren women to be accused of having "eaten" their children. During the *bragorɔ* ceremony there is an abundance of food, singing and dancing for it is truly a community celebration. So far the young lady has undergone two of the most important rites of passage: her outdooring at eight days old and her puberty rite shortly after her first menses. After the *bragorɔ* rite the girl is now free to marry any suitable suitor in the years to come. What happens when after marriage the young lady is unable to conceive? There are some suspected causes and typical solutions sought in the Ashanti context.

41 Sarpong, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 28.

Infertility: Obstacle to the Rite of Wom(b)anhood

Suspected Causes of Infertility

Spiritual Activity

Infertility is a threat to an important rite of passage; this sterile state will prevent a young lady from being considered a true wom(b)an. To examine attitudes towards infertility it is helpful to examine some of the suspected causes of infertility. Traditionally, the Ashanti believe sickness and disease have not only natural but also supernatural causes. In Ghana there has been a long presence of both traditional priests and herbalists. While priests were trained in the healing properties of herbs, herbalists were, for the most part, not involved in divination and supernatural activities.[42] Priests and priestesses of the traditional religion, as well as herbalists, are often the figures consulted when an individual is experiencing infertility.

There are several believed causes of infertility. Most of the supposed causes are inherently spiritual in nature with physical repercussions. A woman may be suspected of being actively involved in witchcraft (*abayisɛm*) or having had a curse placed on her by one who is involved in the dark arts. Curses are believed to be very real and potent and as such the Ashanti even believe it is possible for infertility to be an inherited curse that several generations of women will endure. Such a curse may only be reversed by divine intervention and penance for a previous generational sin.

Infertility is viewed as a manifestation of bad luck, which is a way of describing a divine curse or displeasure.[43] An individual may invite a self-imposed curse by constantly ridiculing and deriding people as a youngster. Since the Akan believe in the power of words, especially those consistently repeated, a person may curse themselves with infertility; if after observing a naughty child she says, "if I'm going to have a child like this then I would rather not have a child!"

The Akan people also have a belief that in a previous life a person may have had lots of children who did not amount to much, so when this same individual is reborn they forego the blessings, or in their previous case, the curses, of the womb. Additionally, the pursuit, or hoarding, of wealth has also been believed to be a possible cause of infertility. In Western culture we speak of

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42 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 110.

43 Other manifestations of bad luck include an early or unusual kind of death or suffering because of witchcraft, disease or poverty; Bartle, "The Universe Has Three Souls," 98. Ifesieh also cites divine punishment as a cause of infertility; Ifesieh, "Web of Matrimony in the Bible," 197.

selling one's soul to the devil; the Akan equivalent would be for a woman to sell her womb for wealth instead.

Reproductive Loss and Social Barrenness

Although childlessness is thought to have several causes, most of which are spiritual in nature, women may still create a hierarchy amongst themselves as to who is "less" infertile. In other words, infertility is divided between those who have never conceived and those who have conceived but have not delivered living children. Additionally, our coined term "social barrenness" is helpful in explaining another kind of division of infertility within Akan thought. Social barrenness describes the experience of women who may be physically fertile but due to circumstances, such as widowhood or estrangement from a husband, are unable to do so. Typically, a widow who has no children is not distinguished from a married woman who has no children. Although of differing marital statuses these women would all be considered barren. What is significant in Ashanti society, however, is that some may have compassion so that "if it is known that a childless woman was once under conception but through miscarriage or child death cannot now boast of a child, the shame that she would have felt is very much mitigated. It is hardly her fault that her child could not be born, or that it could not live, although it might!"[44]

When a woman miscarries or experiences a stillbirth, she is told a proverb "so long as the pot itself isn't broken; it can be filled again." Already the hope is that the woman will be able to heal (physically and emotionally) from the loss and try again soon for another child. However, if she is not able to conceive or give birth again some members of society may esteem her as being better off than a woman who is known to have never conceived. However, it is fair to say that most in this society believe that "a woman who has miscarried or lost all her children at birth is considered to be infertile too."[45]

Violation of Taboos

A person could gravely offend the gods by not respecting particular taboos and subsequently they would be punished with infertility. Childless women may be suspected of having undergone multiple abortions in their premarital years. Fear of being accused of multiple abortions was present because, spiritually speaking, it was regarded as killing one's children, a grave sin. Physically speaking, abortion practitioners in rural areas were known for occasional malpractice. Women who got pregnant after premarital sex, providing they had gone

44 Danquah, *Ghana's Cultural Heritage in Retrospect*, 133–34.

45 Yebei, "Unmet Needs, Beliefs and Treatment-Seeking for Infertility," 136.

through their puberty rite, were not encouraged to have abortions because the children were still valued as members of the family.[46] The circumstances under which abortion was deemed reasonable was a pregnancy resulting from an extramarital affair, or a girl who got pregnant before observing her puberty rite. Other than the stated reasons "abortion from both a social and a cultural point of view seemed absurd and self-destructive."[47] Indeed, in traditional Akan society abortion was considered "senseless and self-defeating for women," due to the cultural and economic benefits that they carried.[48]

Infertility was not only believed to be a result of violating the taboo of abortion but also the violation of the taboo of menstruation. The taboo nature of blood can be seen in the numerous euphemistic expressions for menstruation.[49] The Akan believe *mogya* (blood) is at once profane and sacred. *Mogya* is pure because the mother passes this on to her children and matrilineal descent is what ensures pure bloodlines and eradicates inheritance disputes.[50] The taboo nature of blood is seen in the restrictions placed on women during menstruation.[51] Traditionally, a woman in menses could not visit any chief, go to fetch water or cross a river, make food for their spouses or sell food to customers.[52] In fact, "when women were in their menses they had to show by painting the left wrist with white clay."[53] Menstruating women were confined for six days in special houses situated on the periphery of the villages.[54] The emission of blood was thought to be so taboo[55] that it was feared that menstruating women who came into contact with men could somehow drain the men of a kind of life force.[56] If a woman continually dishonoured such a taboo then she would be punished with infertility.

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46 Amoo, "The Effect of Western Influence on Akan Marriage," 228.

47 Bleek, "Did the Akan Resort to Abortion," 125.

48 Bleek, "Did the Akan Resort to Abortion," 126.

49 For a comprehensive list see, Agyekum, "Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo," 373.

50 It is because of this that while the Akan hold menstruation as taboo they simultaneously view it "as an emblem or manifestation of creative power, particularly in the sense of fertility"; Agyekum, "Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo," 380.

51 Agyekum, "Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo," 377.

52 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 12.

53 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 12.

54 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 12.

55 Indeed, "the greatest taboo of the deities was menstruation"; Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 12.

56 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 12. Also, Agyekum comments that during menstruation a woman was believed to be "at the height of her powers," spiritually speaking; Agyekum, "Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo," 379.

In summary, traditional beliefs held about the cause of barrenness range from a divine curse, witchcraft and even multiple botched abortions done in the past because of a promiscuous lifestyle.[57] Whatever the suspected cause, infertility "is viewed as a social tragedy."[58]

Solutions Sought for Infertility

To counteract infertility sometimes women would consult traditional priests and priestesses at local shrines. In fact one of the frequent prayer requests given to priests of the traditional religion was for fertility.[59] Women would seek out particular deities who were known to give children. One such god, *Asuo Afram* (Afram of the Water), was known for granting the requests of barren women for babies. Sometimes children who were born because of the deity's benevolence were given a special hairstyle, locks with cowrie shells tied in, to indicate that they were a gift from the gods.

Consultation at the local shrines also included herbal prescriptions and treatments. The traditional priest guarding the *bosom* (god) would prescribe special herbs to promote fertility. There was no specific herbal remedy for infertility but each traditional priest prescribed his/her own concoction. At times, traditional healers, who were not traditional priests, but knew of the healing properties of various plants, would share that wisdom with those suffering with various ailments and diseases. Infertility was treated as a physical and spiritual phenomenon so that the traditional priests were often consulted for herbal remedies in conjunction with special prayers and petitions.

The Ashanti have a fertility figurine known as *akuaba* that is believed to have fertility powers. An *akuaba* is a doll that is usually carved out of wood. In previous times it was customary for little girls to have one as a play doll. However, when a barren woman wanted a child she would go to the local woodcrafter and get one made.[60] The priest would dedicate the woman and her *akuaba*.[61] She would expend energy and time treating it like her little baby: bathing, consoling and carrying the dolly on her back with a waistcloth. Tradition has it that if the woman pleased the gods by treating the *akuaba* well, then she would

57 Wilkinson and Callister, "Giving Birth," 208.

58 Wilkinson and Callister, "Giving Birth," 208.

59 Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 83–84. Also, Bleek, "Did the Akan Resort to Abortion," 125.

60 The use of *akuaba* among Ashanti infertile women was probably first written down by Rattray; Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 281.

61 Cameron, "In Search of Children," 32.

be granted a child of her own. When successful, the *akuaba* was given back to the shrine as a votive offering.[62]

Aside from herbal remedies and the use of the ritual fertility doll called *akuaba*, childless women did not often pursue surrogacy. Surrogacy in Ashanti custom is viewed differently from that of the ancient Near East. Since in this matrilineal culture children always "belong" to the mother, surrogacy becomes problematic. Even if a senior wife wishes to claim the second wife's child as her own the likelihood of this being accepted is miniscule, even when the second wife is of a lower social class. Adoption of an orphan or an infant of a relative in one's own matrilineage is preferred over surrogacy. Yet it is traditionally believed that "the only fulfillment a woman could have in this life is to have her own baby. Even an adopted baby was not good enough."[63] A Twi proverb that corroborates such thinking states, *wo nsa akyiri bɛyɛ wo dɛ a, ɛnte sɛ wo nsaayam*, "even if the back of your hand tastes good to you, it is still not like the palm of your hand."[64] This proverb communicates the belief that adopting a child is still not as fulfilling as birthing one's own child. Still, if a woman is barren it is better for her to adopt a child than not. After examining the various solutions typically sought in Ashanti society we may ask what happened if a woman, after trying various solutions, remained childless? The consequences of infertility will now be examined.

Consequences of Infertility

While male infertility is not ignored or thought to be improbable, often in Ashanti culture the woman will first be suspected or blamed as the cause.[65] For the *ɔbaabonin* (barren woman) there are several significant consequences or

62 Cameron notes that it is for display, however it should be clarified that this is not merely artistic display but also a way to show the power of the *akuaba* for others who come to seek a similar remedy; Cameron, "In Search of Children," 32. Or the doll could also be "given to the child, conceived through its intervention, as a plaything"; Cameron, "Dolls and Toys," 194.

63 Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness'," 453.

64 This is a paraphrase not word for word translation of the proverb. Traditionally, people eat food not with utensils but with fingers and cupped palms. The cupped palm holds more food and thus is conducive for eating. If food happens to get onto the back of one's hand it may be eaten, but this is not the usual place from which food is eaten. Therefore the proverb suggests that having one's own biological children (represented by the palm of the hand) is more pleasurable and conducive than adopting children (represented by the back of the hand).

65 Yebei, "Unmet Needs, Beliefs and Treatment-Seeking for Infertility," 136.

experiences that she may endure as a result of her childlessness. In summary we may state, "infertility leads to stigmatisation, divorce, abuse, resentment and loss of social status and self-esteem. It was indeed a dreaded condition."[66]

Divorce

In Ashanti tradition, a man may not automatically divorce his wife if he suspects, or has caught her in the act of, adultery.[67] In such a case he has the right to seek *ayefar* (recompense).[68] The only legitimate basis for divorce in Ashanti society is the case of a barren wife (*ɔbaabonin*). Again the Ashanti worldview assigns procreation as the primary purpose of marriage; therefore, barrenness is grounds for divorce.[69] "Where after three years of married life sterility or barrenness has been proved sufficient ground for divorce, the *aseda* only should be refunded to the man and no compensation be due to the woman."[70] That adultery is to be tolerated over childlessness is a tradition that underscored the gravity of barrenness in Ashanti.

After the process of divorce has been completed the *ɔbaabonin* (barren wife) will be sent back to her Father's house. However, since traditional Akan culture permits polygyny, a man may marry an additional wife. In this society traditional stories and anecdotes abound of rivalry as the fertile (and often younger) wife flaunts her fertility before the senior childless wife. While polygyny is an accepted social practice the tensions that are created make for a complicated family life. The rivalry among wives, the half-siblings, as well as potential inheritance disputes are all evidence of this fact.

In summary, a woman is more at risk of being divorced for being childless than she is for being unfaithful to her husband. Traditionally, since women despise the stigma of divorce, they are more likely to agree to the husband

66 Yebei, "Unmet Needs, Beliefs and Treatment-Seeking for Infertility," 136.

67 Kwadwo writes that when adultery occurs "the husband is advised to divorce the wife" but further qualifies this by saying that "the husband could continue to marry the woman or he could divorce the woman"; Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 47. While there are concessions made for divorce in certain cases, the Akan believe that adultery is not the first grounds for divorce.

68 This is "the amount payable by the guilty man to the husband of a wife or the parent of a woman (unmarried or widow) with whom he has had such intercourse"; Ackah, *Akan Ethics*, 36. This is unlike the HB context, in which a man and woman who had committed adultery were to be stoned to death. It was only in the case of a premarital sexual relationship that a man would pay the מֹהַר to the virgin's Father (Exod 22:16–17). In the traditional Akan context the *ayefar* must also be paid to the Father of a young woman or widow if a man has had a sexual relationship with her.

69 Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 16.

70 Amoo, "The Effect of Western Influence on Akan Marriage," 237.

marrying another wife. Such a desire to avoid shame and public stigma may mean that a woman is willing to deal with domestic discomfort rather than facing shame at the hands of her extended family or community.

Social Shame and Stigma

The dynamics of honour and shame are as central to Akan culture as to the ancient Near Eastern context. An Ashanti woman or man strives to bring *animonyam* (honour) and not *animguase* (shame) to their family name. In the Akan context, women who do not get married after a long time or who remain childless are said to be without glory and honour.[71]

When an individual belongs to a culture in which there is a strong emphasis on familial and community honour they are bound to do all that they can to achieve such honour.[72] African societies largely see women without children as women without honour.[73] Childbirth signals spiritual enrichment and increases the social esteem and respect that a woman receives.[74] In Ashanti custom the import of children in a marriage means that a childless wife will endure dishonour in both covert and overt ways.[75]

While some childless women are treated with compassion and care, others may be stigmatised.[76] Sometimes the stigma may not come from one's own husband or matrilineage but by people in the community. In traditional Akan culture anyone who is older may ask one of the local children in the village to go on an errand for them. This is seen as normal and children will usually oblige for fear of being accosted if it is found out that they refused an elder's request. In the case of the childless woman a child may refuse to go on the errand citing the reason that the childless woman is being harsh and cruel because she does not know what it is to have a child and therefore she does not know how to treat others' children in a kind way. In the event that the woman would complain to the child's parents she may very well find that the parents side with the child and chide the woman for the second time. In a culture that

71 Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness'," 452.

72 "Because of the importance of belonging to the group in a group-oriented shame culture, people's standing in the community or status is important, making people status-conscious. These societies are usually layered by an 'honor' hierarchy which designates the amount of authority held: ruler over subject, parents over children, husband over wife, elder over younger"; Bechtel, "Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel," 52.

73 Nasimiyu-Wasike, "Christianity and the African Rituals of Birth and Naming," 42.

74 Wilkinson and Callister, "Giving Birth," 202.

75 Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 83.

76 "Both a barren woman (*obonini*) and a childless man (*okrawa* or *kukuba*) were viewed with a mixture of compassion, contempt and suspicion"; Bleek, "Did the Akan Resort to Abortion," 125.

promotes the respect of elders it must be a painful experience to know that a child does not respect one's authority as an elder because of barrenness.

The state of childlessness may even be described as a taboo in Ashanti culture. Thus, a childless woman may be repeatedly used as a point of reference of what not to become. While some may have a general attitude of pity others may use this as an excuse to mistreat and shame her.

Preventing the Return of Ancestors

Ashanti traditional belief states that when a person dies they join the ancestors in *asamando* (the spirit-world or after-life). These ancestors may one day be reborn again as new babies. The essential cycle of birth and death is summarized in this proverb, "*se ebi nko a, ebi nso mma*" (if some do not go, others cannot come).[77]

In traditional Akan religion barrenness is thought to be an immense tragedy as "it prevents ancestors from returning to life."[78] Since women are the guardians responsible for perpetuating the matrilineage the burden of childlessness weighs greatly upon them. Childlessness then becomes a refusal to perpetuate the lineage and thus is seen as an evil state.[79]

Financial Loss and Insecurity

As noted before, inheritance is reckoned by matrilineal means in Akan society, in particular in the Ashanti tribe. Although a man's children do not inherit from his family "it is not unusual for a man to set aside a portion of his acquired property as 'reasonable gifts' for his children or wife, as has been the case, particularly among matrilineal groups."[80] If a husband wishes to bequeath some property or wealth to his wife and children he must specify it clearly, and in the presence of witnesses, while he is still alive. The deceased husband's matrilineage will assume rights to the wealth if there is some ambiguity as to what the man wanted his children and wife to have.[81] Thus, a wife cannot hope to be entitled to enjoying her husband's property if she has not had any children

77 Kwadwo, *Owuo Apakan*, 64.

78 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 107. Also Gyekye agrees, "Barrenness and sterility are considered a threat to the continuity of human life and existence"; Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 83. Ifesieh agrees that infertility "threatens the continuity of the lineage"; Ifesieh, "Web of Matrimony in the Bible," 204.

79 Addai, "Does Religion Matter in Contraceptive Use among Ghanaian Women?," 262.

80 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 92.

81 "A man's valuable property is passed on not to his children, but to his brother or his sister's son"; Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 83–84.

with him. Even in the case where he may clearly specify this as his wish his family may override this after his death.

Observing the emphasis on fertility in traditional Ghanaian society, economic anthropologists have asserted that reproduction was "the most important means by which women ensured social and economic security for themselves, especially if they bore male children."[82] A woman's best financial investment was her biological children.

Inferior Funeral Rite

Ashanti custom values birth, marriage and death as the important rites of passage. In this culture funerals are very important and often elaborate affairs. In traditional Ashanti society a woman who died childless recieved inferior funerary rites.[83] It is not only the immediate family of the deceased who come to mourn but it has been known for strangers and people who only knew the deceased from afar off to come. It is believed that the glory of a person resides in the amount of people who come to mourn and bewail the deceased but also celebrate the achievements of the deceased's life. The celebration or praise of the person's life is the primary reason for the funeral in Ashanti culture. As such a woman who has not given birth receives less honour and celebration at her funeral compared with a woman who has children.

An exception would be made in the rare cases that the childless woman was an exceptional member of the community who took care of others and lived a particularly outstanding life. To underscore the fact that a childless person's funeral was inferior and less honoured than others it is helpful to cite a ritual that was performed. The deceased woman would have hot pepper inserted into her genitalia at the time of death. This was to signify the hot sting of childlessness. While a woman was wealthy at the time of death it would still not be enough to "atone" for her barren state. For "despite the abundance of wealth a person may have acquired: 'nothing is as painful as when one dies without leaving a child behind.'"[84] Although she was dead a person would tell her that when she approached the guardian of *asamando* (the after-life) she would be given lashes for not fulfilling her duty on earth before being allowed to enter into the afterlife. Since death is an important rite of passage into the after-life all Akan

82 Owusu-Ansah, "The Society and Its Environment," 99.

83 Also, a woman who died in childbirth also did not receive an elaborate funeral since her death was "believed not to be honourable"; Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 3.

84 Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, 84.

people long to have children for it is hoped that they will "organise decent funeral celebrations."[85]

Wom(b)anhood: *The* Rite of Passage

There are various rituals surrounding conception, birth and post-birth periods in Ashanti culture. These rituals serve to encourage and emphasise the importance and honour associated with these stages. Wom(b)anhood, that is, the state of being the biological mother of living children, is *the* most significant rite of passage in an Ashanti woman's life.

Once a woman becomes pregnant she receives much care and attention from her family, especially her mother and mother-in-law. "At the beginning of pregnancy the fortunate woman is all full of joy, smiles and gratitude to those who, in fact or allegedly are the cause of it."[86] In this way the community emphasises the privilege and importance of birth, not just for the woman, but also for the continuation of the family's legacy. Traditionally the mother or mother-in-law of a pregnant woman will cook special food for her. This food consists of soups and stews containing vegetables, meat and herbs combined to give the woman the nutrition needed for a healthy pregnancy. During parturiency a woman was given different herbs, seeds, particular foods and "mystical medicines" as her antenatal drugs.[87]

The special attention given to the woman does not stop once the baby is born. After a safe delivery a woman is given various white cloth and beads to wear for forty days.[88] "White symbolizes purity, joy, victory over the dangers attendant on delivering a child and pregnancy."[89] This is Akan practise has an interesting parallel to the Hebrew post-partum law enforcing a forty-day separation after the birth of a male child (Lev 12). In Akan custom the forty-day period applies to both male and female while in the Hebrew context a new mother would observe a sixty-six day separation after the birth of a female child. Another difference is that in Akan custom the forty days are observed as a sign of victory and purity from the childbirth blood, while in the Hebrew context purity is only conferred after the observation of the stated period.

85 Yebei, "Unmet Needs, Beliefs and Treatment-Seeking for Infertility," 136.

86 Danquah, *Ghana's Cultural Heritage in Retrospect*, 133–34.

87 Danquah, *Ghana's Cultural Heritage in Retrospect*, 134.

88 Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 14.

89 Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 14.

Post-birth the new mother's mother (or another respected older female relative in the case that her mother is deceased) will come to stay in the home for some time in order to pamper the new mother and impart traditional wisdom on how to look after the infant.[90] Additionally, it is common for the husband to give the new mother the traditional cloth *Kente* and other gifts as a token of gratitude for his wife's bravery and effort during the strenuous time of pregnancy and childbirth.[91]

The gift of *Kente* is especially significant because of its rich history and meaning(s) in Akan custom. *Kente* is a woven cloth that was traditionally only worn by royalty. Even in cases where wealthy citizens wore the cloth, weavers reserved specific designs for royalty. This was taken so seriously that it was thought to be taboo to be dressed in the same *Kente* pattern that royalty wore. The weave pattern and colours all communicate powerful messages based on proverbs, events and cultural traditions.[92] There are prominent *Kente* types with significant meanings for Akans; *Adwiniasa* (the mind/ideas have come to an end),[93] *Sikafuturo* (Gold dust),[94] *Ɛmmaada* (it has not happened before),[95] and *Nyankonton* (rainbow).[96] Additionally, the colours of the cloth help the wearer determine the occasion for which it is suitable.[97] A woman who has just given birth will usually be given *Kente* of colours such as blue, white and green

90 This extended visit is even more special when the new mother has her first child. The grandmother assumes the role of a midwife in that she teaches her daughter the way in which she can look after the newborn baby.

91 Oduyoye, "Women and Ritual in Africa," 14.

92 Additionally, the amount of yardage that one wears also communicates status and wealth. This is why Ashanti men typically wrap several yards of cloth around themselves so that the cloth was voluminous around one shoulder while the other shoulder was bare. Royal women wore two big pieces of cloth, one covering from the waist to the legs and another from the shoulder to the waist, as opposed to other female citizens who wore one piece; Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 112.

93 The meaning of this phrase is "all creativity and innovation have been exhausted in weaving this cloth." This pattern is usually thought to be one of the more complicated designs worn by royalty.

94 This name denotes signifies wealth and prominence.

95 This word signifies that the cloth is usually worn on days when something new happens, something that has never happened before.

96 This cloth is woven to mimic the diversity of the rainbow and signifies the creativity and beauty.

97 The colour of the *Kente* cloth is assigned meaning and often determines the occasion to which one wears the cloth. Yellow is often representative of gold and wealth; red represents blood and sacrifice; green designates fertility; blue is symbolic of fortune and celebration and; white is representative of purity, spirituality and festivity.

which all symbolise celebration and fertility. For the new mother, the *Kente* symbolises the royal status that she has gained in bearing a child to continue the lineage.

A woman who is able to have a child achieves an honourable change of status in the title *ɔbaatan* (a good mother). Every *ɔbaabonin* (barren woman) would like to exchange that title for that of *ɔbaatan* and be rid of her social shame. The title *ɔbaatan* is important since the Akan refer to the supreme God as *Nyame ɔbaatanpa*. He is the God who acts like a good mother and cares for his children.[98] Thus, to call a woman *ɔbaatan* is to reaffirm that she is made in the image of the supreme God who creates.

The honour of motherhood is demonstrated in the scenario where the new mother is depicted as "one who has returned safely from the battle front. For women, coming face to face with one's own blood is itself an act of bravery and part of what it means to be a human being."[99] The new mother is seen as a warrior in a very real sense for both she and her infant have survived the dangerous warfare of pregnancy and parturition.[100] When a woman has safely been delivered it is said about her "*wa fa ne ho afa ne ba*" (she has delivered herself and her baby). For a limited period after the birth a new mother is greeted with the saying "*yɛ ma wo afremu*" (we greet you as one who has delivered).

Mothers of Multiples and Many Children

In traditional Ashanti society special honour was bestowed on women who had many children.[101] Since having many children is considered a sign of divine favour traditional culture does not encourage contraception.[102] Natural family planning methods such as the lactational amenorrheic method, breastfeeding for an extended period after the birth of a baby, or the rhythm method, in which the woman abstains from sexual intercourse during her fertile days of the month, have been most popular. The encouragement was to have as many children as one's body would allow.

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98 The Akan do not deliberate or are not dogmatic about the gender of God. God is often talked of in masculine as well as, as this example shows, in feminine language.

99 Oduyoye, "Women and Ritual in Africa," 13. Also, Pobee agrees "safe delivery is considered a great triumph over evil forces"; Pobee, "Aspects of African Traditional Religion," 14.

100 Danquah, *Ghana's Cultural Heritage in Retrospect*, 133–34.

101 "A woman's access to social prestige formerly depended to a large extent on the number of her children"; Bleek, "Did the Akan Resort to Abortion," 125.

102 "Traditional religion tends to associate infertility, reproductive failure, and fertility restrictions with sin and punishment, which may discourage use of modern contraception"; Addai, "Does Religion Matter in Contraceptive Use among Ghanaian Women?," 262.

Women who had ten or more children were specifically recognised by the state.[103] The husband's family would bring meat and gifts to celebrate what their in-law had done for the husband's honour. In a time when every family was expected to ensure that the community farms were cultivated, a woman with ten or more children was given an exemption from participating in communal labour. It was suggested that in her many births she had done her share for the community.

Furthermore, a woman would receive significant honour if she gave birth to twins. *Ntafo* (twins) were viewed as an extraordinary gift from God. In a polygamous society where men could marry sisters only the Chief could marry two twin sisters and this made twins very important.[104] At birth red and yellow beads and cowries were tied to the twin babies' hands to signify their special worth. There is a particular god (*abosom*) called Abam Kofi who is the guardian of all twins. An annual harvest festival features all twins in the community and Fridays are also sacred days for twins. Being a mother to many children and multiples was an honoured state, such a person was considered to be a blessing to their community. There is high value in having children, and as many as possible, in the Akan culture.[105]

Conclusion

Traditional Akan culture, in particular Ashanti custom, prizes fertility to the extent that it is seen as inextricably linked to the identity of a woman. Due to the matrilineal nature of this culture a strong emphasis is placed on the need for a woman to bear children. While rites of passage such as naming, puberty and marriage are celebrated, it has been proposed that motherhood is *the* most significant rite of passage for any woman. Infertility, then, is viewed as an obstacle to passing through the most important rite of passage. Causes of infertility are usually suspected to be spiritual in nature with physical manifestation. Thus, the solutions sought are not divorced from spiritual consultation.

The possibility of divorce, social shame and financial insecurity are some of the consequences that make infertility an agonizing state for most women. Only mothers may obtain true womanhood for "only a mother is a true

103 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 5.

104 "A man cannot marry two sisters but a chief can marry twin sisters"; Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 21.

105 Aborampah, "Women's Roles in the Mourning Rituals," 263.

woman."[106] Furthermore, women are encouraged to have as many children, in the context of marriage, as a way of securing honour and security. In such circumstances, the word "wom(b)an" is appropriate to emphasise the centrality of motherhood to the identity of a woman in Akan culture.

106 Bleek, "Did the Akan Resort to Abortion," 125.

PART 1

Biological Barrenness

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Introduction to Part 1

To this point we have provided a survey of infertility in the ANE and Akan cultures. While one is a survey of ancient cultures and one is a survey of a modern traditional culture it can be seen that there are similarities, as well as key differences, which will help to highlight the biblical text and bring out the contributions of the barrenness tradition.

This first section will examine the narratives that deal with biological barrenness. The stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Manoah's wife, Hannah and the great woman of Shunem will be treated in part one of this study. The intent is to discover the main theme related to fertility/infertility which arise from these narratives and how these stories compare or contrast with the cultural analysis already provided on the ANE and Akan cultures. Intertwined in each chapter will be an Akan reading of the respective characters and their circumstances.

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CHAPTER 4

Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel: Beautiful and Barren

Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel are three women in Genesis who experience biological barrenness. As relatives, by blood and through marriage, these women's infertility experiences form the basis of the ancestral narratives. This section will explore the circumstances surrounding infertility and examine the ways in which this biological barrier was overcome. The stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel form the basis of the barrenness tradition within the HB.

Sarah's Narrative

Sarah is first introduced as the wife of Abraham in the *tôlĕdôt* of Terah (Gen 11:29).[1] Sarah is עֲקָרָה "barren" and this state is further emphasised by the phrase "she had no child" (Gen 11:30). It is not clear how long Abraham and Sarah have been married but one thing is certain, the continual and permanent nature of Sarah's barrenness is denoted in the use of the imperfect verbal form. This notice makes for a jarring stop within the flowing rhythm of the *tôlĕdôt*[2] in Genesis. The movement of life and generations comes to a halt at the announcement of Sarah's infertility. At this point in the *tôlĕdôt*, Sarah is the obstacle to the continuation of Terah's line through Abraham. As the narrative unfolds we find that this intentional announcement of the threat of Sarah's infertility also complicates the larger plot of the promised seed and the great nation. However, this pregnant pause in the *tôlĕdôt* is an intentional device emphasising that YHWH is the only one who, through his initiative and intervention, can fulfil the impossible and perpetuate the promise.[3]

1 Unless specifically referring to their name changes, the names Sarah and Abraham will be used throughout for consistency.

2 Indeed, understanding that the plot of Genesis *is* genealogy is vital to understanding the narratives; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 18. The *tôlĕdôt* or "the genealogies are of great importance; they are not merely a skeleton for the narratives"; Steinberg, "The Genealogical Framework of the Family Stories in Genesis," 47.

3 "The blessing, mandate, and promise was to 'Be fruitful and multiply' (Gen 1:28; 9:1). And now barrenness! The incongruity between what is intended and what happens is overwhelming"; Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 95.

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The function of marriage in the ancient world was not primarily companionship but the perpetuation of the family. The same holds true for many non-Western traditional societies today. In the Akan context, the purpose of marriage is to perpetuate one's matrilineage. Therefore, the narratives of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel's infertility are read with great interest and more depth.

After YHWH has promised that he will give the land to Abraham's offspring, reciting an impressive list of peoples whom he will dispossess (Gen 15:18–21), the jarring announcement appears again "but Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children" (Gen 16:1). From the last barrenness announcement in the *tôlĕdôt* (Gen 11:30) until this point in the narrative it is Sarah's beauty that has been in focus. She is beautiful enough to attract the attention of Pharaoh and King Abimelech (Gen 12:14–15; 20:1–18).[4] Despite her maturing years Sarah's beauty is singled out and makes her husband anxious about his own safety. Yet, now her prominent feature, her childlessness, is on centre stage once more.[5]

The juxtaposition of the phrases "Abram's wife" and "she had borne him no children" highlight the tension between the two realities (Gen 16:1). In the ANE context a "real" wife was by definition a woman who bore children for the perpetuation of her husband's lineage. Thus, at the very least Sarah's wifehood is called into question and, at the most, her status is at risk. The Akan reader, while acknowledging that in this context a woman's beauty is her glory, is disturbed about a woman who is aesthetically exceptional and yet cannot perform the primary function of childbearing. There is some suspicion cast on why this woman has been gifted with exceptional beauty but not with the "natural" function of childbearing.

The cause of Sarah's infertility, before her menopause, has been deliberated. Could it be that the cause of Sarah's infertility was initially vocational? Teubal suggests that Sarah is childless because she is a *lukur* or *naditu*, either of which belonged to a class of priestesses who did not give birth.[6] Her hypothesis is based on the fact that Sarah's place of origin is Mesopotamia and therefore her

4 Steinberg asserts that despite Sarah's beauty Abraham sojourns to Egypt in an attempt to get rid of her because she is barren; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 54, 76. However, the primary reason given for the sojourn to Egypt is a famine (Gen 12:10), furthermore, if Abraham wanted to get rid of Sarah he likely would not have travelled to Egypt to do so.

5 The two elements of Sarah, her beauty and barrenness, are emphasised; Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren," 115.

6 Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 109.

infertility is likely to be connected to a religious vocation.[7] In this case, Hagar is her companion, not slave, whose job it is to bear children for her.[8]

Teubal does not clarify that if Sarah is clearly a *naditu* or *lukur*, how should the emphatic notice that Sarah is barren and has no child be interpreted (Gen 11:30)? If Sarah were a priestess, such a notice would be redundant for her childlessness would be expected. Additionally, while we know that a certain class of priestesses remained childless as a result of their religious vocation, there is no evidence that they were rendered biologically barren. Thus, Teubal's argument only stands if Sarah had remained in vocational service until her menopause. If Sarah had been committed to a life of childlessness, as certain Mesopotamian priestesses were, why does she protest that *YHWH* has prevented her from having children? The notice of barrenness seems to be an intentional pause in the rhythmic *tôlĕdôt* that would not be necessary if it were religiously or culturally expected for Sarah to be childless due to her vocation. Sarah's infertility is presented as a problem worthy of pause and emphasis in the genealogy; it is not presented as the result of a Mesopotamian priestess' devotion.

True wom(b)anhood is achieved when a woman has given birth, so believe the Akan. Teubal's hypothesis may find some sympathy in this cultural context. Was Sarah, in her life prior to when she appears in Genesis 11:29, involved in some kind of spiritual activity or vocation that meant she was under an oath of childlessness? Such a suspicion would not be far from an Akan reader's mind.

Sarah does not attribute her barrenness to a specific illness or even a curse brought about by some wrongdoing. Rather, she communicates to her husband, הִנֵּה־נָא עֲצָרַנִי יְהוָה מִלֶּדֶת, "Now behold, Yahweh has restrained me from bearing" (Gen 16:2). Abraham too has earlier espoused this belief that children are a divine gift when he says that YHWH is the one who has not given him offspring (Gen 15:3). The primary cause of her childlessness, according to Sarah, is YHWH.

Sarah is the only woman, within the biological barrenness tradition, who directly attributes her infertility to YHWH. Her belief that YHWH is the one who has prevented her from having children is interesting from an Akan perspective. To this point, Abraham has received repeated assurance of descendants,[9] so Sarah's belief is juxtaposed to the several assurances received. Or does Abraham not share these divine promises with his wife? Perhaps it is the same question that can be asked of Eve about the instructions that YHWH gave to

7 Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 235.

8 Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian*, 191–200.

9 Gen 12:2, 7; 13:15–16; 15:4–5; 15:13, 18; 17:2–8, 16, 19–20; 18:10, 14, 18.

Adam, was she aware of them? Usually in the Akan context it is the infertile woman who takes the initiative to visit a traditional priest in order to divine whether or not she will have a child despite her biological challenge. Akan infertility tradition typically begins with the concern of the woman and not the promise of the deity. Thus, for the Akan it is striking that Sarah and Abraham had the promise that this would happen and that it was spoken of on more than one occasion.

The finality of Sarah's barrenness is stated in no uncertain terms: חָדַל לִהְיוֹת לְשָׂרָה אֹרַח כַּנָּשִׁים "the way of women had ceased to be for Sarah" (Gen 18:11). Reaching menopause confirmed that it was biologically impossible for Sarah to conceive. Yet, intriguingly Sarah does not seem to acknowledge her menopause as the main culprit of her infertility. Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel's marriages are scrutinised by an Akan reader because of the delay in children. The most scrutiny, however, is placed on Sarah's infertility for it lasts the longest,[10] and menopause terminates all hope. For these reasons Sarah is a disgraced woman in Akan culture. She has stopped menstruating and there is no biological way that she can have children. Without menstruation there can be no fertile *mogya* (blood), which is what creates *abusua* (matrilineal family). Sarah has squandered the resources of her menstrual years and she has no child to show for it. This is seen as a tragedy.

Solutions for Infertility

Adoption

Before Sarah's surrogate plan, she and Abraham had tried adoption as an option. Abraham may have adopted Lot as his heir.[11] This would not be unreasonable since Lot was Abraham's fraternal nephew. Yet, the text does leave some room for doubt in this area. In the event that Abraham does adopt Lot it only sharpens the bother, perhaps even pain, of having to separate from one's heir.

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10 The Hebrew narrative does not specify the ages at which Abraham and Sarah married. However, Abraham was seventy-five years of age when he left Haran (Gen 12:4) and a hundred years old when Isaac was born (Gen 21:5). Thus, barrenness had been Sarah's experience for *at least* twenty-five years. We can account for approximately twenty years of infertility in Rebekah's case due to the notifications of Isaac's age at marriage and at the birth of his sons (Gen 25:20, 26). Rachel's infertile years are not calculated, however, it seems probable that it was less than twenty-five years.

11 Steinberg, "Kinship and Gender in Genesis," 50.

In a patrilocal system, the ideal scenario was for an heir to stay in the residence of his father in order to gain his inheritance.[12]

An Akan reading would query whether Abraham interpreted the several promise of descendants as being potentially fulfilled through Lot's line. This may be an additional reason why he generously agrees to let Lot settle in the best portion of the land; the fertile valley (Gen 13:8–12). Since Abraham has no maternal sisters, according to him Sarah is his paternal half-sister (Gen 20:12), it is understandable, although not ideal, to an Akan why he wants to adopt his fraternal nephew and/or trusted servant in the absence of a biological heir.

Abraham and Sarah had put measures in place to ensure that they had an heir. When God exhorts Abraham in a vision promising reward, the patriarch retorts "what will you give me since I go childless" (Gen 15:2). Here, we have Abraham personalising the experience of infertility. We find out that Eliezer of Damascus, a servant born in Abraham's household, has been adopted as his heir. The Nuzi tablets list instances in which childless masters would adopt people as heirs. Such heirs would be obliged to care for their adoptive parents and perform their burial and mourning rites when the time came.[13] The point of divergence between Nuzi adoption practises and the adoption of Eliezer is that there is no specific instance of the adoption of a slave to be an heir at Nuzi.[14] Abraham's adoption of Eliezer indicates the extent of his longing for an heir.

YHWH clearly states that Eliezer will not be Abraham's heir because he will have his own child.[15] He then shows Abraham the stars in the heavens and tells him that this will be the number of his descendants. Since Abraham believes this promise of many descendants, God deems him as righteous (Gen 15:4–6). The adoption of Lot and Eliezer, arrest the attention of an Akan woman. These are all male-initiated strategies of dealing with childlessness. An Akan woman without a child would rather adopt someone from her matrilineage rather than her husband's. Lot is more Abraham's blood than Sarah's. In a sense this defeats the point of the adoption; to strengthen one's own matrilineage. An Akan reader wonders why, even in a patrilineal context, Sarah does not push for someone in her own family, or even her own servant, to be adopted. In this

12 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 25.

13 Vos, *Genesis and Archaeology*, 70.

14 Davidson, *Genesis 12–50*, 43.

15 While YHWH deposes Eliezer as heir, he still remains an esteemed member of the household for he is later entrusted with the task of finding a wife for Isaac. Although in Gen 24 the servant of Abraham is nameless, it has been assumed that it could be Eliezer; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 138. Also, Sarna, *Genesis*, 62.

worldview it is risky to adopt someone from your husband's family because you are susceptible to being the "outsider" in the home.

Surrogacy

Sarah's barrenness renders her desperate and eager to create her own legacy. This is the reason why we are introduced to Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian female slave (שִׁפְחָה). Sarah insists[16] that Abraham sleep with Hagar, her maidservant (Gen 16:2). Sarah's motivation behind the surrogacy plan is significant; "perhaps I will be built up by her" (Gen 16:2).[17] Sarah is not completely certain of the outcome of her surrogacy plan but she expresses hope with the use of אוּלַי "perhaps."[18] The desire to "be built up," shows that matrilineal undercurrents, even in a patrilineal society, are surfacing. Sarah knows that in order to be considered a true wife in the ANE worldview she must bear children. However, there is more suggested here, a woman's legacy could be built up through her own children. A woman would not ordinarily receive property or an inheritance, but what she was capable of receiving was the legacy, the honour that accompanied the birth and rearing of children. Sarah is beautiful and barren and desires to build her legacy through surrogacy.

Having a concubine play the role of surrogate was acceptable[19] in the ANE because such a woman did not disrupt the economic balance of the family. A concubine could not dispossess the first wife and this was why Sarah felt comfortable in suggesting the idea to Abraham.[20] Sarah's interaction with her maidservant, Hagar, is important to the progression of the narrative. The contrast between the two women is apparent. Sarah the elder wife who is barren is contrasted with Hagar the younger and fertile woman. They differ in socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and fertility. Abraham agrees to the plan but the surrogacy turns sour. Sarah's desire to be built up by Hagar results in her "being small" in Hagar's eyes when she conceives. The verb קָלַל may also be

16 The verbal construction בֹּא־נָא (imperative plus particle of entreaty) expresses intensity and a strong desire on Sarah's part.

17 The Septuagint's rendering "in order that you may beget children by her," is interesting. Brayford concludes that the LXX translation is influenced by the Mediterranean honour-shame culture that deemed it more appropriate to emphasize Abraham's progeny rather than Sarah's desire to build her legacy; Brayford, "To Shame or Not to Shame," 172.

18 The Septuagint presents no uncertainty on Sarah's part, if Abraham goes ahead with her plan he will surely get male children from Hagar.

19 While polygamous marriages were culturally acceptable they were not prevalent across all groups in society. Typically, a minority number of people possessed enough wealth to afford multiple wives; Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, 128.

20 Steinberg, "Kinship and Gender in Genesis," 49.

rendered as being "trifling" or "of little account." Sarah is not only beautiful, barren and in desperate desire to be built up but also now subject to shame in the eyes of one who is socially inferior.

What results from the surrogacy gone wrong is the transformation of Hagar from a passive to a prominent character. Although "the maidservant of Sarah" is appended to her name, Hagar gains equal status to Sarah because she will also be the mother of a great nation. Hagar is inextricably linked to Sarah's narrative. In reaction to her slave's insolence, Sarah afflicts her to the point that the pregnant Hagar runs away into the wilderness. A dry desert seems a much safer place for the expectant mother than the comfortable accommodation of her angry mistress. Ishmael's expulsions, as a foetus in his mother's womb and also as a teenager, are turning points in Sarah's narrative (Gen 16:6–14; 21:14–21). These scenes are reminders of just how complex a surrogacy situation can be even in a cultural context where it is customary.

Sarah's treatment of her slave and the unborn child may be seen by an Akan as part of the reason why the deity takes a long time to grant her a child. In traditional society, the *akuaba* is a wooden carved doll or figurine that is given to an infertile woman. The woman is to care for and dote on the *akuaba* as a real baby. If she is able to do so, then she is considered a worthy candidate for motherhood and God would aid her in conception. In this interpretation, Hagar's child is a sort of *akuaba*, a test to see how Sarah will look after a child that is not her own. An Akan reader may think that the Angel tells Hagar to return so that Sarah can have another chance to prove herself worthy of motherhood by taking care of Hagar. This may be why it took about fourteen years for the deity to give Sarah and Abraham a child. Fourteen years separate the time that Abraham has his own "seed" and the time that Sarah bears her own son. In contrast to Sarah, Abraham was childless for about eleven years after leaving Haran.[21] For an Akan woman fourteen years watching your husband raising his son, conceived by another woman, is an eternity. It is possible that Sarah has resigned herself to her fate and embraced Ishmael. However, the narrative will soon reveal that these fourteen years have perhaps given occasion for a sense of resentment to grow.

Reversal of Infertility

Before YHWH reverses the barrenness experience of Abraham and Sarah he first performs a name change. Abram means, "he is exalted (as to his) father"

21 Abraham was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born (Gen 16:16).

or "the father is exalted."[22] The new name Abraham does not literally mean "father of multitudes" but is an extended form of the previous name.[23] YHWH tells the newly named Abraham that his wife is to be renamed so as to reflect the blessing. Sarah is not present when her name is changed (Gen 17:15–16). Sarai "is the equivalent of *šarratu*, 'queen,' an Akkadian translation of a Sumerian name for Ningal, the female partner of the moon-god Sin."[24] The new name Sarah (princess) "is a dialectical variant of Sarai" and the exact significance of this change is vague.[25] The blessing of Sarah will not only entail a son but also a lineage of kings. YHWH declares, "I have given you a son by her" (Gen 17:16), the use of נָתַתִּי conveys that the action has already been completed even if Abraham and Sarah have not yet visualised the results.

Abraham falls on his face with hysterical laughter at the possibility of him and Sarah having a child (Gen 17:17). He specifically mentions his and Sarah's age. Before the flood, it was common for men to have children past the age of one hundred (Gen 5:6, 18, 25, 28, 32). Yet, Abraham's hysterical laughter suggests that at this time the age for childbearing was significantly lower.[26] Abraham's laughter precedes Sarah's and YHWH too will have the last laugh when the miracle child arrives.

In Akan society, marriage serves the purpose of perpetuating the *abusua* (family lineage). That YHWH promises Abraham and Sarah that they will be *abusuapanin* (male elder) and *ɔbaapanin* (female elder) of not just a matriclan but also a nation is profound. As the Mother and Father of this new nation Sarah and Abraham share in the creative side of *Ɔbɔadeɛ*, *Bɔrebɔre* (the Creator God) who is also called *Ɔbaatanpa Nyame* (the Motherly God).[27] It is the Akan belief that when humans procreate they are fulfilling the task that *Onyankopɔn* (the Great One)[28] has given to all human beings. As such a couple are considered to experience the ultimate blessing of *Onyankopɔn* when they bear a child. The more children one has, the more blessed one is thought to be.

The name שָׂרָה (Sarah), meaning princess (Gen 17:15–16), is understandable for an Akan because in this culture a woman takes on a sort of royal status

22 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 464. "No certain, precise parallel to the name Abram has been found so far in Near Eastern sources"; Sarna, *Genesis*, 86.

23 "It is a flexible 'literary' etymology, which takes no account of linguistic differences between the name and the proposed explanation"; Fleishman, "On the Significance of a Name Change and Circumcision," 21.

24 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 363.

25 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 476.

26 Although, Abraham's father Terah also seems to have children at the later stage of seventy years (Gen 11:26).

27 Interestingly, this appellation is often used when invoking God in the Akan context.

28 For other Akan names for God see Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," 192.

when she gives birth. This is shown in the giving of *Kente* to her at this occasion. Not only does Sarah's name designate royalty but YHWH further clarifies וּבֵרַכְתִּי אֹתָהּ וְגַם נָתַתִּי מִמֶּנָּה לְךָ בֵּן וּבֵרַכְתִּיהָ וְהָיְתָה לְגוֹיִם מַלְכֵי עַמִּים מִמֶּנָּה יִהְיוּ "I will bless her and from her I will give you a son, indeed I will bless her and she will be nations, kings of peoples will come into being from her" (Gen 17:16). Sarah will not only be mother to a big family but kings will be numbered amongst her numerous descendants. Sarah's new *abusua* (family) created from her *mogya* (matrilineal blood) will be a royal one. In this way Sarah is not only a *ɔbaatan* (mother) but also a *Ɔhemmaa* (Queen mother). In being the ancestor and ancestress of nations, Abraham and Sarah embody a part of the divine nature, for in Akan society God is known as *Bɔrebɔre* because he is the Creator and origin of all life.

In preparation for the fulfilment of the promise not only does YHWH perform a name change but he also delivers a prophecy by way of three visitors to Abraham's tent (Gen 18:1–16). Abraham plays host as is expected but he is excessive in his hospitality as the amount of bread that he asks Sarah to bake is guaranteed to feed all of them combined and leave quite a lot left over.[29] These visitors are extraordinary,[30] as they seem to be interchangeably identified with YHWH. The three visitors are "Yahweh and his entourage."[31] This display of hospitality to a divine figure, or the representatives of the deity, is reminiscent of the Ugaritic epic of Keret who presents a feast to El in order to plead for children.[32]

The visitors ask the whereabouts of Sarah (Gen 18:9) but when they are told she is in the tent they do not call for her but continue speaking to Abraham. The prophecy is declared, "I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son" (Gen 18:10). Until this point Abraham had been painted a picture of a future filled with numerous descendants and blessing; promises which had no timeline and little detail (Gen 15:4; 17:6).[33] Yet now a deadline has been given, "this time next year," finally Abraham and Sarah can hope for precision in their promise (Gen 18:10).

Sarah is in the tent[34] and overhears the visitors. Sarah laughed within herself and said, "after I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure

29 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 9.

30 "These 'men' are no ordinary wayfarers"; Sarna, *Genesis*, 129.

31 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 5.

32 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 9.

33 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 12.

34 The location of some women in tents are "in passages that emphasize their deep concern over uncertain or contested motherhood"; Seeman, "'Where Is Sarah Your Wife?'," 107. The passages referred to are Gen 18:6–10; 24:65–67; and 30:14–17.

(עֶדְנָה)?" (Gen 18:12). She mentions that she and Abraham are advanced in age;[35] however, age seems subordinate to the main cause of the chuckle—the possibility of sexual pleasure.[36] The rhetorical question "shall I have pleasure?" may indicate that Abraham and Sarah had ceased sexual relations.[37] Sarah was intrigued by the sexual pleasure that she would have with Abraham; never mind having a child, it is possible that the aged couple may not even be participating in conjugal relations!

Puzzlingly, YHWH chides Sarah's laughter and says that she has said "Shall I indeed bear *a child*, when I am *so* old?" (Gen 18:13). The challenge is that the narrative does not record Sarah having said these words. Is YHWH anticipating Sarah's train of thought? Additionally, Abraham previously fell on his face with laughter when YHWH promises him descendants (Gen 17:17), so why is Sarah now being rebuked? The narrative does not explain why Sarah is chided and Abraham is not.[38]

Protecting Legacy and Inheritance

True to the prophecy of the three visitors, Sarah does give birth to her own child (Gen 21:1–2). What is seen next in the narrative is proof that a mother must protect the place of her child in his father's house if she is to protect her own legacy. It is at Isaac's weaning feast (Gen 21:8) that once again we are notified that relations between Abraham's two wives are not as peaceful as the silence in the narrative so far has suggested.

After adoption and surrogacy have failed to produce satisfactory long-term results, Sarah is not going to jeopardize the future of her miracle child. Isaac may have been anywhere up to about three years old since it was fairly typical for children in the ANE to be weaned around the age of three.[39] During

35 In the LXX Sarah does not refer to her age but Abraham's age to indicate the impossibility of the promised child. Since she has not experienced pregnancy and birth up until now she questions the possibility since her husband Abraham is even older than her. The focus in LXX is on Abraham's, not Sarah's, old age.

36 *Contra* Seeman, who follows Sarna's definition of עֶדְנָה "abundant moisture" (Sarna, *Genesis*, 130), but goes further to conclude that Sarah is referring to menstrual moisture; Seeman, "'Where Is Sarah Your Wife?'," 113.

37 Turner, *Genesis*, 84.

38 Hamilton suggests that perhaps Sarah is rebuked due to a continual unbelief since Abraham previously told her about YHWH's promise of descendants. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 13. Still, one wonders what makes Sarah's laughter more unbelieving that Abraham's.

39 Gruber, "Breast-Feeding Practices in Biblical Israel and in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia," 63. Also, 2 Macc 7:27.

the course of the celebration Sarah comes across Ishmael laughing, playing or mocking (Gen 21:9).[40] The Piel participle מְצַחֵק is ambiguous within the clause, since there is no object explicitly stated. Was Ishmael being playful or mocking Isaac or Sarah?[41] "The picture of two boys playing with each other on equal footing is quite sufficient to bring the jealous mother to a firm conclusion: Ishmael must go! Every year he, the older one, becomes a stronger rival for Isaac, and at last he will even divide the inheritance with him."[42] There is the possibility that Sarah is concerned not about rivalry but about the two brothers forming a bond. If Ishmael, no longer presumed to be firstborn and heir at this point,[43] still plays with the toddler Isaac then perhaps Sarah will later have to contend with the affection between the two brothers.[44]

Whatever the activity and whoever its object, Ishmael's action may be described as "the straw that broke the camel's back," it was not necessarily negative or major,[45] but in Sarah's perspective there was no better opportunity for

40 Interpretations of the Hebrew verb צָחַק in this narrative range from the proposal that Ishmael was innocently playing or laughing all the way to inappropriate sexual activity. For the latter interpretation see Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 80. Steinberg maintains that here צָחַק in the Piel connotes sexual behaviour (masturbation) rather than laughing or mocking. This interpretation seems less likely, however, since the narrative's context would cause one to ask why Ishmael would be engaging in this sexual act at a very public weaning ceremony for his baby brother Isaac? To support this hypothesis a fairly loose connection is made with the later use of צָחַק in Isaac and Rebekah's case (Gen 26:8) and other narratives.

41 The LXX translates the Hebrew with παίζω, which denotes more of a playful, celebratory activity rather than mocking or taunting.

42 Rad, *Genesis*, 232.

43 Despite Abraham's plea to YHWH "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (Gen 17:18), Abraham is told that while Ishmael will be blessed he will not be the son of covenant (Gen 17:19–21). Upon Isaac's birth Ishmael ceases to be Abraham's firstborn but Sarah is still uncomfortable by the bond that Abraham has with his son and this causes him great displeasure when she demands his expulsion (Gen 21:11).

44 Janzen agrees, "Oblivious as children will be to the complex histories and agendas of their parents, these two boys explore the delights of interaction in a world whose boundaries are as yet open horizons rather than borders guarded and controlled by settled adult opinion, proven adult knowledge, and narrowly proposed adult goals"; Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth*, 73.

45 Alter proposes that Ishmael is playing *like* Isaac, in other words he is portraying the air of a firstborn and heir, and this is what angers Sarah; Alter, *Genesis*, 98. Teubal differs saying "I do not believe that Sarah's banishment of Ishmael has anything to do with material wealth; it had to do with religious ethics. The rite of circumcision (an Egyptian but not a Mesopotamian custom) enforced new rules of conduct unacceptable to the priestess"; Teubal, "Sarah and Hagar," 236. Troost proposes that Gen 16 and 21 should not be conflated

decisive action. Ishmael's mysterious action is enough to anger Sarah and fuel her subsequent demand that Abraham send the Egyptian maidservant and *her* (Hagar's) son away (Gen 21:9–10).

There may have been an existing concern in the ANE regarding the expulsion of a slave's children.[46] Abraham likely had to grapple with cultural expectations as well as fatherly instinct and this meant that only "a special revelation from God" could convince expel Ishmael and Hager (Gen 21:12).[47] The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, unfair and tragic, releases them to develop as characters in their own right.

Sarah's characterisation highlights that if a woman is desperate enough to build her legacy and protect her child's inheritance she will oppress another woman and her child in order to realise her desire. The contrast between Sarah and Hagar is apparent in their socio-economic status, ethnicity, age and fertility. However, the roles of exemplary characters are reversed so that the reader is inducted into the complex consequences of infertility and the various solutions sought in ancient and perhaps even contemporary times.

However, Sarah's exploitation of Hagar propels the latter to a future of being an ancestress of a great nation in her own right. Further, Hagar a female former slave is juxtaposed with a wealthy man Abraham. Both of these individuals experience theophanies. Yet, in response Abraham builds an altar to YHWH, the one who appeared to him (Gen 12:7). Hagar, on the other hand, gives a name to YHWH, the one speaking to her (Gen 16:13). There is an implicit contrast between, and evaluation of, Abraham and Hagar. YHWH appears to Abraham and receives an altar, but he speaks to Hagar and receives a *name* from a foreign female slave. Hagar, the pawn in Sarah and Abraham's surrogacy plan, erects a name-memorial that will outlast a structure of stones. Additionally, Hagar receives the same promise of innumerable descendants as Abraham (Gen 13:16; 16:10).

As her belly develops from flat to round so does Hagar's characterisation. Hagar enters as a silent slave but exits the narrative stage as a mother in charge of her son's destiny. Hagar does what many Akan mothers want to do for their

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or else it produces an androcentric reading. She writes, "the conflict that underlies the eventual dismissal is not just a Sarah-Hagar conflict. It is a problem of Abraham's, who fails to see the difference between his two sons, a difference caused by their having different mothers"; Troost, "Reading for the Author's Signature," 261–62.

46 The thought that the Nuzi material is concerned with the expulsion of children born by a substitute mother has been challenged. Lee suggests that while HSS V 67 addresses substitute childbirth it "does not bear witness to a precedent concern about a woman desiring to send away the sons of a substitute mother"; Lee, "Two Translations of HSS V 67 and Their Significance for Genesis 16, 21, and 30," 63.

47 Vos, *Genesis and Archaeology*, 71.

sons; promote a marriage that will further the matrilineage. Hagar's choice of an Egyptian wife,[48] then, is not surprising. The former slave goes on to ensure that the twelve princes of Ishmael exist before the twelve sons of Jacob (Gen 17:20; 25:12–18). While Sarah is protecting the inheritance of her son, Hagar is also working to preserve her lineage and carefully selects someone whom she judges will do the same.

The unpleasant emotions and actions associated with infertility and a desire to build legacy and protect inheritance at all costs are significant strands in Sarah's story. We will encounter other women in the HB who will go to great lengths to resolve infertility. Sarah's barren beginning is resolved with a fruitful future. As the first ancestress of Israel Sarah sets the stage for the HB's barrenness tradition.

Conclusion to Sarah's Narrative

Sarah, the ancestress of Israel, first appears on the scene as Sarai, the barren wife of Abram. Famous for her endangering beauty, the surrogacy-gone-sour plan, and her laughter, Sarah is anything but a flat character. Sarah, a product of her time and culture, believed that true wom(b)anhod is achieved through childbirth. This belief is still held in non-traditional cultures like that of the Akan. The function of marriage is the perpetuation of the lineage thereby making infertility all the more tragic.

The movement of life in the *tôlĕdôt* comes to a halt at the announcement of Sarah's infertility. The most scrutiny is placed on Sarah's infertility for it lasts a long time, and menopause terminates all hope. Sarah's beauty cannot conceal her most prominent feature her childlessness. Sarah does not attribute her barrenness to a specific illness or even a curse brought about by some wrongdoing. Rather Sarah is the only woman, within the biological barrenness tradition, who directly attributes her infertility to YHWH.

Before Sarah's surrogate plan, she and Abraham had tried adoption as an option. The adoption of Lot and Eliezer, however, were male-initiated strategies that did not provide satisfactory results for Sarah. Sarah, like many Akan women, takes her fertility into her own hands and strategizes a solution that she believes will benefit her.

48 Ishmael's Egyptian wife, with whom he has twelve sons, is not named. The omission of her name is probably not due to her Egyptian ethnicity as elsewhere other foreign wives are named, for example Esau's Hittite wives (Gen 26:34–35). Whatever the reason, the omission of Ishmael's wife's name keeps Hagar in focus. Hagar remains the only and prominent woman in Ishmael's genealogy (Gen 25:12–18).

Barrenness renders Sarah desperate and eager to create her own legacy. The desire to "be built up," shows that matrilineal undercurrents, even in a patrilineal society, are surfacing. Sarah knows that there is honour and legacy in the birthing and rearing of children. Yet, surrogacy in order to build her legacy results in her "being small" in Hagar's eyes when Hagar conceives. Sarah is now subject to shame in the eyes of one who is socially inferior.

Sarah's narrative testifies to the complexity of surrogacy even in a cultural context where it is customary. Additionally, Sarah's characterisation highlights the reality that if a woman is desperate enough to build her legacy and protect her child's inheritance she will oppress another woman and her child in order to realise her desire. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, unfair and tragic, marks a turning point for them to develop as characters in their own right. What results from the surrogacy gone wrong is the transformation of Hagar from a passive to a prominent character. Hagar is not to be ignored or diminished. There is an implicit contrast between, and evaluation of, Abraham and Hagar. YHWH appears to Abraham and receives an altar, but he speaks to Hagar and receives a *name* from a foreign female slave. Hagar, the pawn in Sarah and Abraham's surrogacy plan, erects a name-memorial that will outlast a structure of stones. Hagar, in her own right, becomes the ancestress of a multitude (Gen 16:10; 25:12–18).

Sarah and Abraham's solutions of adoption and surrogacy do not provide satisfactory results in the long-term. Perhaps this is YHWH's plan, to finally fulfil the promise when all human possibilities have been exhausted. Sarah's narrative emphasises a motif that is encountered throughout the HB: the generations of promise will be primarily perpetuated by YHWH's initiative and intervention. Both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the possibility of fertility, and sexual pleasure, but eventually YHWH has the last laugh at the birth of the miracle child Isaac.

Rebekah's Narrative

The settings of the betrothal scenes (Gen 24:1–58; 29:1–20; Ex 2:16–21)[49] in the HB offer idyllic pictures that appear to suggest that all will be well in the future

49 The common elements are as follows: "the protagonist travels to a distant land; he waits by a well; a girl(s) approach(es) the well; they encounter one another at the well; the identity of the girl is revealed to the protagonist; the girl(s) return(s) home and tell(s) what happened; the householder comes (sends back the girls) to the well; the protagonist is brought to the home of the girl(s); and marriage ensues"; Aitken, "The Wooing of Rebekah," 10.

marriages. Beginning beside water places the betrothal scenes seemingly foreshadow fertility and peace.[50] However, the betrothal scenes in the Genesis narratives are far from peaceful, for infertility once again threatens the continuity of the *tôlĕdôt*, the generations.

Rebekah's betrothal is an attempt to resolve an obstacle to the continuation of the Abrahamic promise; Isaac, the sole heir, has no wife and therefore cannot perpetuate the lineage of promise. The miracle child of infertile Sarah and Abraham is in need of a suitable marriage partner and Rebekah is depicted as "the one." Abraham wishes to secure an endogamous marriage to perpetuate the lineage of promise.

Rebekah's Betrothal and Marriage

Genesis 24 presents the betrothal and marriage of Isaac and Rebekah.[51] It is Abraham's initiative that results in Isaac receiving his wife, Rebekah. Notably, the text does not hint at Isaac ever being consulted. The elderly patriarch commissions his most trusted servant[52] to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham's relatives. So committed is Abraham to this mission that he commences an oath-swearing ritual.

The oath-taking ceremony is significant; the incumbent must place his hand under the thigh of the oath's initiator, Abraham. The thigh here is a euphemism for Abraham's genitals.[53] Possibly this symbolic act was to propose "the threat of sterility for the offender or the extinction of his offspring."[54] More likely, however, this action is not a self-imprecation by the incumbent in the case that he breaks the oath[55] but rather indicated the burden on the oath's originator. Effectively, Abraham is communicating his belief that his family lineage is in jeopardy if the oath is unfulfilled. The one called to witness the

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50 Water, from streams, fountains or wells, are imagery for the sexuality and fertility of a woman (Song 4:12, 15; Prov 5:15, 19; 9:17). "The water is a life giver and so is the woman, who draws it"; Vermeulen, "To See or Not to See," 6.

51 Fuchs sees a "discrepancy" in the way that betrothals work for men and women in ancient contexts; for men it is an indication of transition into independent life while for a woman it is "merely a transposition" from the care of her father to that of her husband; Fuchs, "Structure, Ideology and Politics," 279. Fuchs' depiction of the brides as mere chattel is overstated. Rebekah's long and detailed narrative not only highlights her free will but her hospitality and adventurous nature is compared to Abraham.

52 The servant is actually not named in this narrative but due to the description "his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned" (Gen 24:2), it has largely been assumed that this is Eliezer (Gen 15:2).

53 Smith, "'Heel' and 'Thigh'," 469. Also, Malul, "More on Pachad Yitschāq," 196.

54 Speiser, *Genesis*, 178.

55 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 139.

oath, "Yahweh, the God of heaven and the God of earth," will ultimately be the one responsible for deciding the punishment if the oath is broken.[56] Isaac's prospective marriage partner is important because he is the only miracle child of Abraham and Sarah. Additionally, however, the continuation of "legitimate" descendants is central to the Genesis narrative. Abraham must ensure that his son not only finds a wife so as to continue the family lineage by ensuring an endogamous marriage.[57]

Previously, Gen 24 has been categorized as a wisdom story, with the central focus being an exemplary servant whose master's prosperity is dependent on his faithfulness and wisdom,[58] yet, this is not the primary categorization. Rather, this narrative's prime person is to present and resolve yet another threat to the Abrahamic promise; Isaac the only heir has no wife therefore he cannot continue the lineage of promise. Genesis 24–25 details the threat and its resolution. Furthermore, this narrative emphasises that the obstacle may only be destroyed by Yahweh's direct intervention, or by intermediaries who are providentially guided. Later, Isaac will take on the role of an intermediary (Gen 25:19–26) but for now the servant is the intermediary. Akan readers recognize the servant's role since traditionally someone may represent you in your absence and marry someone for you. This is possible because Akan marriage is a marriage between two families of which the bride and groom are representatives. In this way, Eliezer is an extension of the groom Isaac, and can marry Rebekah on his behalf.

The divine role in the choice of a good marriage partner is emphasised. Since the legacy of the family depends upon a suitable marriage partner, the help of deities were invoked in marriage pursuits and marriage celebrations. This is why Abraham does not only rely on the oath but believes Yahweh will send an angelic messenger to pave the way for the servant (Gen 24:7).

The servant presents a hypothetical situation. If the prospective bride does not want to come back with him should he make arrangements for Isaac to go there instead (Gen 24:5)? Was there a possibility that a woman would not want to go and meet her husband who is in a different region? It may have been a cultural practise in this area for brides to stay close to their father's house

56 It is breaking of "the principle of the family cohesion" that will incur the wrath of Yahweh if the servant breaks the oath; Malul, "More on Pachad Yitschāq," 198.

57 Arnold, *Genesis*, 219.

58 Roth, "Wooing of Rebekah," 181–84. For Roth the theme of a good wife or good marriage arrangement is only secondary.

even when they got married.[59] Perhaps knowledge of such a cultural practise is what leads the servant to present this hypothetical scenario.

The servant does not travel alone (Gen 24:32), but he is the single most important character embarking on this journey. When he reaches his destination he stops at the city's bounds and prepares the camels for watering.[60] The time is evening which is when women fetch water from the spring. The servant prayed that the first woman who, at his request, offered him a drink of water, and then volunteered to water his camels, would be the bride of Abraham's heir (Gen 24:13–14). Abraham does not give any such directive so the loyal servant seemingly devises the test. If the test succeeds then Yahweh's *hesed* (loyal love) toward Abraham will be confirmed. Rebekah is the only wife that has to go through a test, without even knowing so, in order to attain this status. Again, supernatural guidance is indicated because the servant does not know that this young woman belongs to Abraham's family.

When the prayerful man spots Rebekah coming towards the water source, her physical appearance catches his attention. Rebekah is described physically as "exceedingly good" (Gen 24:16). Rebekah's beauty is reminiscent of her deceased grandaunt and future mother-in-law, Sarah. Sarah is described as "beautiful appearance" and "very beautiful" (Gen 12:11, 14). This propels him to trot towards her to begin his test. While Rebekah is drawing water for the camels the servant will silently stare at her.[61] The note concerning Rebekah's single and virginal status serves to add to her candidacy for marriage to Isaac. Only

59 The concept of errēbu-marriage in which a son-in-law was adopted and by his father-in-law and lived with his wife's family, instead of the wife living with the husband's family, has been proposed by some scholars; Neufeld, *Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws*, 56. *Contra*, Van Seters who calls this categorisation "academic fiction" on the grounds that the features of Jacob's marriages indicate a variation of normal marriages and not a different kind involving a formal adoption by the father-in-law; Seters, "Jacob's Marriages and Ancient Near East Customs," 388. The category of errēbu-marriage is not widely supported due to scarcity of evidence within the cuneiform texts. Jacob's residence in his father-in-law's compound is not necessarily an indication of a special king of marriage but likely due to the fact that Jacob has indentured himself in order to secure his marriage.

60 The camels and the spring serve as markers for significant points within the episode. Camels were burdensome animals that drank and ate a lot, therefore if one's hospitality could extend to the camels then this would bring great honour to a person and their household. Later, Isaac will look up and see camels coming and Rebekah will be riding on a camel and also look up and see Isaac, she will then dismount from her camel (Gen 24:63–64).

61 The hitpael participle מִשְׁתָּאֵה is a hapax legomenon and seems to denote an intent captivation (Gen 24:21).

the best kind of woman will do for the miracle son, Isaac. The young woman is not only beautiful but also hospitable, as will be seen, and with her sexual purity intact she is an ideal wife in the ANE perspective.

Rebekah obliges the servant's request for a drink of water but goes further and volunteers to water his camels (Gen 24:18–20). Rebekah's beauty, and hospitality, holds the attention of the servant as he waits for Yahweh's approval (Gen 24:21). By the time that Rebekah has finished watering the camel the servant has received the confirmation for which he has been silently waiting. The test itself requires that Rebekah would have had to draw a lot of water to refresh ten thirsty camels. The text's focus seems to be less on how many gallons of water were involved but rather a test of hospitality; will Rebekah serve to the point of inconvenience and exertion. In the ANE the extent of a host's hospitality was regarded as an indicator of humility and sacrifice. Even after watering the camels and revealing her identity Rebekah assures the servant that there is not only room for him in her father's house but also straw and feed for the camels (Gen 24:24–25). If the servant were looking for someone who would go above and beyond the call of duty, then he certainly found that quality in Rebekah.

Rebekah is greatly valued as a potential wife and this is shown not only in her bridewealth but also in the additional gifts she receives. In the ANE the bridewealth had to be paid by the groom to the bride's family. The servant comes well prepared with gifts and bridal payment for the prospective wife. He takes ten camels and all sorts of "good" things (Gen 24:10). Rebekah is also given some expensive jewellery even before the servant confirms her identity by asking, "whose daughter are you" (Gen 24:23). Later, more silver, gold and garments are given as gifts to Rebekah (Gen 24:53). Choice gifts are presented to Laban and Rebekah's mother but no gift is mentioned for Bethuel (Gen 24:53). The prospective wife of Isaac must be given a fitting bridewealth and gifts.

Upon receiving the precious gifts from the stranger, Rebekah runs to "her mother's household" (Gen 24:27–28). The divergence from the customary *bêt ʿāb* may intentionally highlights the role of wise women who take proactive and leading roles in their present circumstances and for the future.[62] Matrilineal undercurrents will continue to surface within these patriarchal narratives that appear only to be concerned with the promised patrilineage of Abraham. Laban meets Rebekah and sees her jewellery and hears the words the stranger has spoken to her. Laban runs to meet the servant and extends great hospitality

62 Cf. Ruth 1:8; Song 3:4; 8:2 and imagery of women's households in Proverbs; Meyers, "Returning Home," 109–11.

to him by bringing him to the house, unloading and placing the camels, and washing the servant's feet (Gen 24:31–32). Hospitality is the sought-after qualification for Isaac's potential wife, but now the servant cannot accept the full extent of Bethuel's hospitality until he has explained the reason for his lodging.

Smartly, the servant leads up to the marriage proposition by elaborating on key factors: divine favour, abundant financial/material resources and an important oath. Yahweh has blessed Abraham with great wealth: flocks, herds, precious materials, servants, camels and donkeys. These gifts are not the only sign of divine favour, however, for the servant reiterates how Sarah gave birth to Isaac in her old age and how Abraham has given all he has to Isaac. Just as Abraham received news of family births and events (Gen 22:20–22), it is highly probable that Bethuel too would have heard of Abraham's prosperity and the miracle birth of Isaac. This part of the servant's speech, then, is a customary retelling of known events or facts but it is framed in a way that will justify his proposal. The "new" information that the servant shares with the family that they do not know is that Abraham has made him swear an oath to find a wife for Isaac amongst his relatives (Gen 24:37). Again, this piece of information serves to strengthen the marriage proposal.[63]

Rebekah's worth as a wife is highly estimated for if she is given in marriage to Isaac, this gesture will be a display of חֶסֶד and truth to Abraham (Gen 24:49). Laban, Rebekah's brother, is as much involved in the marriage negotiation, as is Bethuel. It was not common practise for brothers to be involved in marriage negotiations while the Father was alive so it is interesting that Laban does here.[64]

63 The servant takes great pains to retell the events leading up to his present lodging in Bethuel's house. However, there are a few details that he embellishes, or organises, for his own purposes. First, he abbreviates some of Abraham's original speech. Abraham says that Yahweh, the God of heaven, who led him from Terah's house and the land of his birth, the God that spoke to him and swore a covenant with him, is the same God that will send his angel to give success to the servant's search (Gen 24:7). The servant abbreviates this and paraphrases Abraham, "The Lord, before whom I have walked" (Gen 24:40). Additionally, Abraham says that if the woman is unwilling to follow the servant then he will be released from the oath. However, the servant now has Abraham saying, "when you come to my relatives; and if they do not give her to you, you will be free form my oath" (Gen 24:41). In Abraham's mind there will be no hesitation from his family only possibly the young lady. In the servant's mind, perhaps because of his impressions during their encounter, he does not see hesitation coming from the girl but possibly from her family. The servant is a loyal man who shrewdly organises information in order to strengthen the marriage proposal.

64 Also, Gen 34 is the other example of the unusually active role that brothers play in the marriage negotiations of their sister.

Laban's role as an eager brother will develop further when reappears again as a shrewd father-in-law. He will exploit his sister's son in deceptive marriage negotiations. It seems that the servant begins speaking to Laban (Gen 24:33, a singular masculine voice gives the servant permission to speak freely), but then in Gen 24:50 we find out that Bethuel is also present. Laban is the first to begin the marriage negotiation and then he and his father agree that they can neither add to nor subtract from this divine act (Gen 24:50). Both Laban and Bethuel consent to the marriage, yet in the morning when the servant wishes to leave with Rebekah, her mother and Laban ask for her to stay ten more days (Gen 24:55). The servant does not want to be delayed and when Rebekah is asked what her wish is she says she is willing to go straightaway with him. Here Rebekah shares a commonality with her father-in-law to be, Abraham, she leaves her family and region on divine initiative.[65]

Rebekah's family anticipate, and invest in, her future fertility by way of a benediction and provision of human resources. Before Rebekah departs, a blessing is pronounced over her—the benediction of fertility and ascendancy over one's enemies (Gen 24:60).[66] Rebekah's benediction parallels the one that Yahweh gives to Abraham after the *Akedah* (Gen 22:17). Within the blessing is contained the essential expectation that marriage is the union in which a wife should bear children for her husband's house. Fertility, then, is also the avenue through which a woman will triumph over her enemies. Conversely, a barren woman will be vulnerable to the cruelty of those who are insensitive to her predicament. Further, Rebekah is not only blessed but is sent away with her nurse as well as an unspecified number of maids (Gen 24:59, 61); people who will serve and help when she bears her own children.

Meanwhile, Isaac is coming back from Beer-lahai-roi to his residence in the Negev. Abraham is living in Beersheba (Gen 22:19) and Sarah has been buried in Hebron (Gen 23:2) so why is Isaac living in a different place from Abraham? Beer-lahai-roi is a significant location since it is the same place that Hagar, the mother of his half-brother, encountered Yahweh over fifty years before (Gen 16:14). Perhaps Isaac is at this place because it has turned into a place of spiritual retreat and access to Yahweh. At this point there is the question of whether or not Isaac knows that the servant has gone on this errand to find him a wife.

As evening approaches Isaac goes outside in the fields. His activity is described with the Hebrew verb לָשׂוּחַ that may mean anything from taking an

65 Sasson, "The Servant's Tale," 263.

66 Sasson, "The Servant's Tale," 263.

evening stroll to digging a hole for excretion.[67] It would appear that the most likely translation is "to lament, mourn."[68] This would make sense as the chapter closes with Isaac being comforted about his mother's death.

As Isaac was mourning the death of his mother, he "lifted up his eyes and looked and behold …" (Gen 24:63). This construction is last used to describe Abraham's encounter with the three visitors (Gen 18:2). That visit had turned out to be a prophetic one in which Abraham and Sarah were finally given a deadline for the promised child's arrival. But now as Isaac lifts up his eyes and looks he does not see three visitors but camels! Camels are a familiar sight if one is living in the Negev where caravans constantly traverse the terrain. Isaac knows that the camels mean that people are coming but he does not yet see the familiar figure of the servant or the anonymous woman riding on one of the camels.

In contrast to Isaac, Rebekah "lifted up her eyes" and saw her future spouse. This is the only time in a betrothal narrative that there is explicit comment of the bride seeing the groom before he sees her.[69] She quickly dismounts in expectation that she will soon be close enough for him to see her (Gen 24:64). Next, Rebekah asks the servant "who is that man walking in the field to meet us?" Once she has confirmed Isaac's identity, Rebekah takes a veil and covers herself. The bride honours her betrothed status by veiling herself as she is about to be presented to her husband.

Isaac is informed about the whole story (Gen 24:66). While there is no direct speech from him, Isaac's subsequent actions are active and intentional. He is agreeable to this arranged marriage for he brings Rebekah into Sarah's tent, he takes her, she becomes his wife, he loves her and he is finally comforted after his mother's death (Gen 24:67). The successive actions confirm the validity of Isaac and Rebekah's marriage. What began as a walk in the field lamenting the passing of his mother has turned out to be a union with his new bride. The reference to Isaac's love and Rebekah's comfort also proposes a mutually beneficial relationship.

The long and detailed betrothal narrative that is Genesis 24 has so far presented an idyllic picture. Rebekah is beautiful, chaste, hospitable *and* the

67 Vall traces various commentators' interpretations of this verb and categorises the main ones as to converse, meditate, pray, to roam, walk about, gather brushwood, to defecate, to lie down, to languish or enjoy the evening breeze; Vall, "What Was Isaac Doing in the Field," 513–16.

68 Vall, "What Was Isaac Doing in the Field," 514, 22–23.

69 In the later case of Leah and Jacob, Leah sees Jacob during the wedding night but Jacob does not see that it is Leah until the next morning (Gen 29:25)!

recipient of a powerful pronouncement. Her worth as a bride is highly estimated as the servant interprets her hand in marriage as a display of חֶסֶד (Gen 24:49).

Infertility and A Difficult Pregnancy

Rebekah is young, pure, beautiful, and hospitable. Nevertheless, Rebekah's marriage to Isaac, a result of divine guidance, is met with the greatest of tests, infertility. This is a threat to the continuation of the Abrahamic promise. To add insult to injury, while the newlyweds are struggling with infertility, Abraham marries another wife called Keturah, and other concubines, and has more children (Gen 25:1–2)! Aged Abraham enjoys continued fertility while Isaac and Rebekah face barrenness.

When Abraham dies at the age of one hundred and seventy-five Isaac is living in Beer-lahai-roi. Beer-lahai-roi is named by Hagar due to her supernatural encounter and is still a place of blessing for we have the notice that Yahweh blessed Isaac (Gen 25:11). The nature of this blessing, however, was material wealth but the couple lacked the wealth of children.

Isaac and Rebekah struggle with infertility for two decades (Gen 25:26).[70] Rebekah's long and detailed betrothal scene evoked anticipation of prosperity and fertility. The Akan reader imagines the infertility in the most tragic sense: a groom's representatives invest time and resources in contracting a marriage only to discover that their new bride is barren. In this vein, the groom or his relatives may suspect that the bride's family's blessing was really as a countermeasure to what they suspected was an inherited trait of infertility or a "generational curse."

Taking on the role of an intermediary, Isaac prays to Yahweh on behalf of his wife Rebekah and her infertility.[71] It is not indicated how often Isaac prayed throughout the years or if this was a singular prayer. Thus, it is not clear how long it took Yahweh to answer Isaac's prayer since the commencement time of the prayer is not mentioned. Finally, after twenty years of marriage Rebekah conceives (Gen 25:21). Isaac is the only husband who intercedes on his wife's

70 Isaac is forty years of age at the time of his marriage to Rebekah (Gen 25:20) and he is sixty at the birth of the twins (Gen 25:26). If Abraham died at the age of one hundred and seventy-five then this means that he lived for thirty-five years after Isaac and Rebekah were married, so when he died Esau and Jacob would have been about fifteen years of age.

71 Isaac and Jacob will later be contrasted in this respect. Isaac does not choose his own wife but yet is so invested in her infertility experience, while Jacob chooses his own wife Rachel but seems to take a nonchalant attitude to her infertility.

behalf. Additionally, he does not marry another wife neither does Rebekah suggest a surrogate.

Rebekah's position is an anomaly in the Genesis tradition in that she does not initiate a solution for her infertility. No other remedy is utilized beside Isaac's intercession on his wife's behalf. Such a 'passive' posture to childlessness is strange to an Akan viewpoint. Since childbearing is chiefly the concern of the woman, a woman would not leave it to her husband to remedy the situation, even if it meant offering prayers the woman would do this herself. Second, Rebekah does not have a rival wife or concubine with whom she must share her husband. Again, this would be an unusual situation for an Akan woman who had experienced infertility for up to twenty years. Rebekah's narrative is one that displays the most untraditional attitude towards infertility. This divergence indicates that there are anomalies in every tradition and even in societies where women go to great lengths to have children there are those who may not actively or overtly lament or seek to resolve their infertility.

Assuming the function of an intermediary, Isaac prays[72] to Yahweh on behalf of his wife Rebekah (Gen 25:19–26).[73] Finally, after two decades of marriage Rebekah conceives (Gen 25:21). The impact of infertility, however, will have residual effect on Rebekah's motherhood.

Rebekah experiences some distress during her pregnancy (Gen 25:22–23). The foetuses are engaging in an action described with the Hebrew verb יִתְרֹצְצוּ literally translated "they crushed one another" within her womb. However frequently this happened, Rebekah felt it was urgent enough to seek an answer from Yahweh. Rebekah needs no intermediary for this divination.[74] "She said, 'If it is so, why then am I *this way?*'" The construction and meaning of this phrase is uncertain. Is Rebekah regretting her life because of the pain that she is going through? Yahweh tells Rebekah, "two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23). The last portion of this verse could have the more ambiguous translation of "the greater

72 It is not indicated how often Isaac prayed throughout the years or if this was a singular prayer. Thus, it is not clear how long it took Yahweh to answer Isaac's prayer since the commencement time of the prayer is not mentioned.

73 Isaac and Jacob will later be contrasted in this respect. Isaac does not choose his own wife but yet is so invested in her infertility experience, while Jacob chooses his own wife Rachel but seems to take a nonchalant attitude to her infertility.

74 Fleming, "'She Went to Inquire of the Lord'," 2.

will serve the lesser"[75] or "the elder, the younger will serve."[76] In other words, at this point in the narrative we are not to be too certain of which child has the upper hand until the story of Jacob and Esau complicates as they grow. The oracle that Rebekah receives from Yahweh is significant because "divine utterances are rare in the Jacob narrative."[77] While it is Isaac who prays for Rebekah to conceive, it is she who prays in order to ensure the safe continuation of her gestation.

Twins: Auspicious and Dangerous

Usually the mention of twins brings automatic images of similarity in looks and behaviour, but Rebekah's twins are more different than they are alike.[78] On one hand, the conception of twins was viewed as a double blessing.[79] On the other hand, archaeology has uncovered some other discoveries that may give another side to the story. Canaanite terracotta plaques dated to the late Bronze Age 1250 BCE depict women pregnant with twins; these plaques had amuletic function.[80] One plaque portrays a dejected woman who is trying to pry open her birth canal and has two small babies in her body.[81] Seemingly, "these plaques were amulets addressed to deities and were intended to be used by women pregnant with twins to protect against the hazards of a double birth."[82] These plaques, worn as amulets, were supposed to invoke divine protection for a woman carrying twins.

It is significant that Haran during the time period of the patriarchs was connected predominantly with the moon-deity Sin. Two common ANE motifs are imprinted onto the plaque; the tree-and-ibex and crescent moon motifs.[83] The crescent moon is the insignia of the moon god, Sin, and is worn as a pendant by the statuette. The moon god was believed to aid a woman during childbirth. Additionally, the tree-and-ibex motif (an ibex chewing on the leaves of a stylized tree) is imprinted near the statuette's genital area. The painted motifs on the terracotta plaques lend to the interpretation that these were used to

75 Turner, "Disappointed Expectations," 63.

76 Friedman, *The Disappearance of God*, 112.

77 Turner, "Disappointed Expectations," 55.

78 Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 84–85.

79 "A woman served the interests of her husband's family, and her own interests as well, when she provided a son to carry on his genealogy; how much more so when a woman bore two sons!"; Steinberg, "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle," 180.

80 Ornan, "Twins," 57.

81 Ornan, "Twins," 57.

82 Ornan, "Twins," 57.

83 Ornan, "Twins," 57.

invoke divine protection for a woman's reproductive organ and assistance during childbirth.[84] Being pregnant with twins was believed to be auspicious but it was also seen as even more dangerous, and even evil, and so one needed an extra amount of divine protection during pregnancy.[85]

Throughout the ANE there were an abundance of omens regarding the circumstances of birth, the physical appearance and behaviour of babies delivered. One such omen states that if a woman gave birth two male twins it indicates that "there will be hard times in the land; the land will experience unhappiness; there will be bad times for the house of their father."[86] If a woman gave birth to male twins who were conjoined at the abdomen this meant that the husband and wife would experience discord.[87] If a woman gave birth to male twins by breech delivery then the "house will be scattered."[88] If a woman gave birth to twins, one male and one female then this indicated discord in the nation and at home.[89] However, if a woman gave birth to twin girls then the "house will prosper."[90] On a spectrum, then, having twin daughters was a favourable omen while having twin boys was almost catastrophic.

Additionally, pregnant women who experienced foetal distress believed this to be an omen of unfortunate things to come. If the foetus cried, hissed or mourned then it signalled destruction of the individual home and even of the kingdom.[91] Not only is Rebekah pregnant with twin boys, but also they are showing signs of foetal distress or conflict. If these cultural taboos and omens were known to Rebekah then it is no wonder she is distressed enough to seek an encounter with Yahweh. Infertility is a bad experience but enduring a pregnancy that is culturally considered to be rife with bad omens may be equally disagreeable.

In Akan culture the meanings of the names given to children are important and can reflect the circumstances surrounding their conception and birth.[92] Customarily, it is the father who chooses a name for his child but an older woman from his matrilineage that pronounces the name to the child at the naming ceremony. Relatives may be consulted as to the name being given

84 Ornan, "Twins," 57.
85 Ornan, "Twins," 57.
86 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 39. These are from Tablet 1, lines 83–86.
87 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 39. These are from Tablet 1, lines 83–86.
88 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 39. These are from Tablet 1, lines 83–86.
89 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 39. These are from Tablet 1, lines 83–86.
90 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 39. These are from Tablet 1, lines 83–86.
91 See Tablet 1, lines 1–4 in Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 32.
92 Cf. chapter three.

to the child so as to ensure that the child has desirable characteristics. That circumstances surrounding conception and birth are taken into consideration can also be seen within the Hebrew text. It is Yahweh who names Isaac (Gen 17:19) and the name seems to be chosen because of Abraham's laughter at the idea of a child in their dotage (Gen 17:17). In Rebekah's narrative, however, an unidentified "they" יִקְרְאוּ are the ones to name Esau (Gen 25:25). This masculine plural could refer to a separate group or it could be a collaborative term for Isaac and Rebekah together. Also, the one naming Jacob is unidentified as the text reads, וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ "and his name was called" Jacob (Gen 25:26). It is strange that the people who name Jacob and Esau are not explicitly identified. The combination of God and others naming children is understood as communal participation in Akan naming ceremonies. Akan fathers may choose names but it is the older women who traditionally pronounced the names at the naming ceremony. In Genesis there is evidence of Yahweh, a masculine group and mother's naming children. Regardless of the child, many of the names indicate something about the circumstances surrounding conception or childbirth.

Consequences of Former Infertility

The legacy of infertility is far-reaching and varied. We may imagine infertility as an experience that is completely resolved when the biological ability to have children happens. However, Rebekah's narrative could be read while asking the question: what impact does past infertility have on motherhood? Perhaps, as in Rebekah's story, there may be an increased impulse to overcompensate for the children that one imagined she would never have. The maternal experience and takes on a unique contour that it maybe would not have if not for past infertility.

The maternal influence reaches climax when, after overhearing her husband's intent to bless their firstborn, Rebekah devises to steal the birthright blessing for her second son Jacob (Gen 27:5–17). It is the divine encounter that she had during pregnancy that engenders the belief that the younger twin should receive the birthright. Probably had it not been for the childless past and resulting divine oracle Rebekah would have followed the typical custom of the birthright belonging to the eldest son.[93]

Years later Esau and Jacob have matured. Rebekah is exasperated with Esau's wives and makes her grievance audible. "I am tired of living because of the daughters of Heth; if Jacob takes a wife from the daughters of Heth,

93 There is an interesting Hebrew Bible motif of the preeminence of younger siblings. Examples include Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon. See Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 13; and Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 11.

like these, from the daughters of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (Gen 27:46). Rebekah is losing the will to live. Whether this is hyperbole or not, it is evident that Rebekah the mother wants more input into who her sons marry. Many mothers, ancient and contemporary, may possibly relate to such a desire. However, perhaps Rebekah's desire is further intensified by the fact that after being childless for twenty years she feels the responsibility to steer her sons' marital lives.

Poignantly, Rebekah's complaint to her husband prompts him to command Jacob to go and marry one of Laban's daughters (Gen 27:46–28:2).[94] While the Akan, like some cultural groups within the ANE context, prefer endogamous marriage—they also recognize that there are risks that accompany the believed rewards of endogamy. One such risk is the strengthening of certain hereditary traits. Rebekah, then, may be viewed as a discerning mother who, probably suspecting that infertility is a family trait, does not explicitly advise her son to marry anyone from her home. Actually, Rebekah only believes that Jacob will need refuge in Haran for a short time (Gen 27:43–44). It is Isaac who compels his son to marry one of Laban's daughters (Gen 28:2).[95] This directive, from an Akan outlook, is unwise when Isaac is aware of the infertility from which his mother and wife both suffered. In their keenness not to mix with other Canaanite groups, Abraham and Isaac effectively compound the infertility problem that exists within the larger family.

The Mother's House/Tent

"Her mother's house" and "his mother Sarah's tent" serve as interesting brackets (Gen 24:28, 67). Rebekah runs to report the arrival of the stranger and his generous gift of gold jewellery to "her mother's house." Isaac brings his bride into "his mother Sarah's tent." The narrative notes "he loved her; thus Isaac was comforted after his mother's death" (Gen 24:67). Isaac needs to be comforted not only because he is the sole child of his mother but also because, from an Akan perspective, he has lost his last true connection to his *abusua* (matrilineal family). As the Twi proverb goes, *wo na wu a, na w'abusua asa* (when your mother dies, your family is finished).

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94 Note the use of the imperative verbal forms, which indicate the directive and imply a sense of urgency (Gen 28:2).

95 It could also be supposed that while Rebekah does not expressly advise Jacob to marry from her family as she advised Jacob with the deception, it is her lament about Esau's Hittite wives (Gen 27:46) that prompts Isaac's explicit marriage advice to Jacob (Gen 28:2).

The pervasive influence of the mothers, one living and the latter deceased, is interesting. Rebekah's mother is perhaps the first to hear the news of the servant who will eventually offer the marriage proposal; Isaac's mother's tent serves as the chamber for the couple's consummation. Sarah's tent, as the location for Rebekah and Isaac's consummation, may be seen as a symbol of fertility. However, an Akan interpretation may suspect Sarah's tent as a portent of future infertility. Sarah's tent possibly foreshadows the newlyweds' impending infertility challenge. The tent represents the tension between a future of fertility and/or infertility that new couples may navigate.

Rebekah's narrative illustrates the characteristics for which women, in many ancient and contemporary cultures, are socialised and celebrated; beauty, hospitality and fertility. The narrative also highlights how infertility, in such worldviews, can threaten the perceived identity of a woman. An Akan reader may see Rebekah as one who has received the investment of financial (a generous bridewealth and dowry) and spiritual (blessings) resources to equip her to fulfil societal expectations but has failed to do so.

Conclusion to Rebekah's Narrative

Rebekah's long and detailed betrothal narrative sets the stage for an idyllic married life. Her beauty, the love that Isaac has towards her, and the comfort she brings to him are no protection against the problem of childlessness. While the infertility lasts for two decades, Isaac does not consider marrying another wife nor does Rebekah suggest this. Rather, Isaac takes on the role of intermediary and it is through this that Yahweh finally grants them twin sons. Read against the ANE background, however, we find that twins were viewed simultaneously as auspicious and a bad omen. This is what drives Rebekah to seek a direct encounter with Yahweh. A rival-wife does not complicate the infertility that Rebekah faces but before she can have the joy of holding her children she must go through a difficult pregnancy. The lavish bridewealth, gifts and fertility-benediction given by her family are details that anticipate that Rebekah will have no fertility challenges. Yet, this is the nature of childlessness within the *tôlĕdôt*, it comes at unexpected junctures, often without explanation, and is only reversed by intervention of Yahweh.

Traditional Akan culture prizes fertility, it is inextricably linked to the identity of a woman and the continuity of the family. Due to the matrilineal nature of this culture a strong emphasis is placed on the need for a woman to bear children. The possibility of divorce, social shame and financial insecurity are some of the consequences that make infertility an agonizing state for most

women. While rites of passage such as marriage are notable, wom(b)anhood is *the* most significant rite of passage for any woman. Infertility, then, is viewed as an obstacle to passing through the most important rite of passage.

Rebekah's story emphasises the dominant ways in which women in both ancient and contemporary cultures have been valued and defined; by beauty, hospitality and fertility. The question looms; does Rebekah's silence and lack of action concerning her infertility suggest an acceptance of her state? Could such silence be meaningful for contemporary people who journey the varied paths of childlessness, voluntary and involuntary?

Rachel's Narrative

Rachel's narrative connects her to Sarah and Rebekah. In Rachel's story it will be seen that the desire for children cannot be quenched by a husband's intense affection, neither will a woman be consoled by her great beauty. Rather, the desire for children leads to solutions that are never without their social consequences. Even within a patrilineal culture, women must strategise for their own social security and legacy.

The betrothal scene involving Rachel and Jacob begins in Genesis 29. Rebekah collaborates with her son Jacob in order to gain the blessing of the firstborn. Livid about being deposed from firstborn status, Esau is waiting for his aged father to die so that he can observe the mourning period and then kill his brother (Gen 27:41). Rebekah has advised her favourite son to seek refuge in her brother Laban's house (Gen 27:43). Jacob must flee the wrath and death-threats of his twin brother. The mother is under the impression that Esau's anger will subside in a short time "a few days" at which point Jacob will have the opportunity to return (Gen 27:44–45). Rebekah has no reason to suspect that she will not be able to bring her favourite son home again.

Jacob is a "late-bloomer" in comparison to his twin, Esau. By the time that Jacob flees from his home Esau has probably been married for quite some time.[96] Rebekah is frustrated with Esau's wives and tells Isaac that her life will be worthless if Jacob follows suit (Gen 27:46). Consequently, Isaac charges Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman but to go to Paddan-aram and marry one of his maternal uncle's daughters (Gen 28:1–2).

Jacob arrives in "the land of the people of the east" (Gen 29:1). Near Haran's vicinity Jacob meets some shepherds by a well and inquires of his maternal

96 If Genesis 27:46 is interpreted as an indication of a significant length of time within which Rebekah observes things about her daughter-in-laws that madden her.

uncle. During this introduction the shepherds point out that Laban's daughter, Rachel, a shepherdess, is approaching the well to water her flock. Rachel's vocation is appropriate since her name means "ewe-lamb."[97] As Jacob sees the young shepherdess he immediately removes the stone covering the well. Surely this action is a display of strength, motivated by, and for the attention of the young woman.[98] For it usually required more than one person to move the stone covering off of the well.[99]

Rachel is described as וְרָחֵל הָיְתָה יְפַת־תֹּאַר וִיפַת מַרְאֶה "now Rachel was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance"(Gen 29:17). Such a detailed physical description is not common; therefore she had extraordinary facial and figure beauty.[100] Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel are all lauded for their appearance. Beauty runs in the family it seems. It is to impress this Beauty that Jacob exercises his brawn and waters all of Laban's sheep. Yet, the narrative soon exposes that Jacob's display of strength cannot conceal his lack of bridal gifts. Jacob's father, represented by Abraham's servant, presented camels and luxurious marriage gifts when in search of a wife. Jacob, in contrast, is on foot and impoverished.[101] Marrying the beautiful Rachel will require a lot more than strength.

After watering the sheep, Jacob kisses Rachel and weeps (Gen 29:11). Kissing was a customary greeting between men in the ANE (Gen 29:13),[102] but it was not customary for a man to greet a young woman with kiss.[103] Before Rachel approaches the well the shepherds had already informed Jacob that she was

97 Arnold, *Genesis*, 266 (footnote 376).

98 "True to an ageless pattern, the prospective suitor is inspired to a display of superhuman prowess at the very first sight of Rachel"; Speiser, *Genesis*, 223.

99 Arnold, *Genesis*, 264.

100 Only a minority of the characters within the HB are described as beautiful or good-looking. Rachel's son, Joseph is described in the same terms (Gen 39:6); Moses is said to be a good-looking infant (Exod 2:2); David's complexion, eyes and overall handsome appearance is highlighted (1 Sam 16:12); Tamar, David's daughter is beautiful (2 Sam 13:1); Absalom's physical attractiveness is recognized by "all Israel" (2 Sam 14:25–26); and Absalom's daughter, Tamar, is also noted for her beauty (2 Sam 14:27).

101 Sarna, *Genesis*, 201.

102 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 265.

103 *Contra* Speiser who believes it was not "out of tune with the mores of the times"; Speiser, *Genesis*, 223. Arnold suggests that this greeting is appropriate since Jacob identifies himself as Rachel's cousin; Arnold, *Genesis*, 265. Also, Sarna, *Genesis*, 202. However, since cross-cousin marriage was also customary during this time, Jacob was always a potential suitor and therefore it is doubtful whether his kinsman would have viewed this kiss as appropriate.

his maternal cousin (Gen 29:5–6) and this may have evoked memories of his father's parting words. The suitor finds out the identity of the woman before she is even aware of him. Without revealing his identity, Jacob exposes his excitement by "defying accepted formalities."[104] Jacob weeps due to intense emotion, relieved at reaching his destination and also encountering a beautiful woman who happens to fit his father's criteria of an ideal spouse (Gen 28:2). Was Jacob stating his romantic intention in the presence of the other shepherds, and perhaps also signalling to Rachel his intention before he had talked with her father Laban? While this may have given Rachel a clue about Jacob's intention she is still, at this point, oblivious to his identity. Jacob finally tells Rachel that he is her relative and she runs to tell Laban, her father (Gen 29:12).

Bridewealth and Deception

Since Jacob is Laban's "bone" and "flesh," terms of kinship, he is offered unlimited hospitality including the opportunity to marry one of Laban's daughters. Jacob is drawn to Rachel because of her physical beauty; this is "love at first sight."[105] Jacob *offers* to work for seven years[106] in order to pay the bridewealth. It is not clear as to how conventional such a time-period was but because of his love for Rachel it seemed like only "a few days" for Jacob (Gen 29:20). Cunningly, Laban does not actually name Rachel as the daughter whom he is giving to Jacob in marriage (Gen 29:19). Jacob's marriage proposal is not smart or shrewd, for in mixing business (herdsman agreement) with pleasure (marriage) he has created an opportunity for Laban's shrewdness.[107] Laban's ambiguous speech is reflective of his devious character. Hospitality comes at a price, for Laban sees this as the opportune time to marry off his eldest daughter Leah.

One's maternal uncle, in Akan culture, is closer kin than one's own father. In this context it is sensible that Jacob is sent to his maternal uncle because such a person would hopefully have his best interest at heart. It was up to Laban to give Jacob direct and honest information. Yet the narrative shows this was not the case. Seven years later, Jacob has fulfilled his end of the bargain and the

104 Turner, *Genesis*, 126.

105 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 262.

106 "The practise of working out the brideprice is quite widespread and the term of seven years is not unusual" (Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 280). Von Rad disagrees and calls this 7-year bridewealth as "high" and "extreme" (Rad, *Genesis*, 285). Also, Turner calls this an "excessive offer" that shows "just how besotted Jacob is with Rachel" (Turner, *Genesis*, 127).

107 "Jacob's request for Rachel as his wages, an unusual form of payment for herding contracts, altered the straight-forward arrangement that Laban envisioned and changed the significance of the herding contract." Morrison, "The Jacob and Laban Narrative," 160.

wedding feast ensues (Gen 29:20–22). The morning after the marriage is consummated Jacob looked and "behold, it was Leah!" Jacob has been deceived.[108] The man who once impersonated his older brother has now been conned by Laban into believing that the older sister is her younger sister.[109] Perhaps, this present pickle is Jacob's comeuppance for his past actions.

When Jacob confronts Laban about the deception he is told that he will have to work another seven years for Rachel but that he can marry her after Leah's wedding-week (Gen 29:25–28). The nature of Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel is different from other marriages in Genesis. Jacob's marriage to Leah and Rachel has formerly been thought to be an *errēbu*-marriage. This was a marriage "in which the wife remained in her father's home, and her children belonged not to her husband's but to her father's family, yet the husband was required to give a *terḫatu* and forfeited it if he left her."[110] Evidence marshalled to support this theory is that Laban made Jacob work for fourteen years but later still could not accept his daughters leaving because in that place "the *terḫatu* or *mohar* was not a compensation to the family for the loss of the woman."[111]

The main purpose of *errēbu* marriage was so that a man, who only had female children, could adopt his son-in-law as his heir.[112] In this kind of marriage the bridewealth was not required because the son-in-law was effectively adopted as a son.[113] However, Laban already has sons (Gen 31:1). Additionally, the interactions between Laban and Jacob show that Jacob's role is "not that of a son and heir, but that of an employee."[114] It is ironic that the person to whom Isaac and Rebekah send their son for refuge is the one who exploits him. Every Akan mother hopes for a good relationship between her brother and her children. Laban speaks to his nephew in kinship terms, "surely you are my bone and my flesh," but in reality he treats Jacob as more of an employee than family.

Jacob's experience is one that exposes the social complexities of sororal marriage. Generally, sororal marriage is seen as counterproductive for men in

108 Hamilton suggests that Jacob is does not recognise Leah not because she is heavily veiled and the wedding chamber is dark but that he is probably intoxicated after the feasting (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 262–63).

109 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 262. Turner also humorously summarises, "As Jacob deceived Isaac with kid dressed as venison so now he is deceived by mutton dressed as lamb" (Turner, *Genesis*, 128).

110 Burrows, *The Basis of Israelite Marriage*, 39.

111 Burrows, *The Basis of Israelite Marriage*, 39.

112 Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 273.

113 Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 274.

114 Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 279. Sarna agrees, "Jacob has the status of an indentured labourer working to pay off the bride-price" (Sarna, *Genesis*, 204).

Akan culture. In this matrilineal society a woman's mother, sisters and children are her closest of kin. Therefore, a man marrying two sisters is making rivals of two women who share one of the closest kinship ties. It takes great wisdom to maintain a marriage to two sisters. When sororal marriage does occur within Akan culture it typically occurs in the context of royal families. This may be permitted since it is assumed that kings possess the wisdom to handle this complex marriage.

Notice of Barrenness

The sororal marriage soon shows Rachel, the shepherdess, to be the preferred wife of Jacob (Gen 29:30). Some time later, after the birth of Leah's four sons, Rachel realises that she has a problem in that she has been unable to give birth to her own children. Rachel becomes jealous תְּקַנֵּא of Leah (Gen 30:1). Until now, Rachel has been described by her vocation, beauty and running to give Laban the news of Jacob's arrival. Now, the first emotion that is attributed to her is that of jealousy.

Yet, while her jealousy is towards Leah, Rachel takes up her complaint with Jacob. Perhaps she did not want to give Leah the satisfaction of knowing that she was jealous of her fertility and motherhood. "No mention had been made earlier that Leah envied Rachel's lovely and shapely body, which attracted Jacob—now, however, Rachel envies Leah's womb."[115] Rachel's statement to Jacob, "give me children, or else I die" (Gen 30:1), is an imperative.[116] It seems that Rachel is holding Jacob responsible for her infertility. Leah has had some children so it appears that Rachel's, not Jacob's, reproductive abilities are in question (Gen 29:31). Nonetheless, Rachel lays the responsibility at Jacob's feet (Gen 29:31). Why does, the preferred younger wife make such a demand of her doting husband?

In many ancient and modern non-Western traditional contexts affection, while seen as beneficial, is not regarded as the primary purpose of marriage. Rachel is the beloved wife who enjoys Jacob's affection and attention yet this is not enough. Like many women in the Akan context, the affection that Rachel's husband has for her does not lessen the desire for children. There is often the lurking possibility that family pressure may coerce an affectionate husband into becoming a resentful partner. A child's love is seen as enduring in comparison to a partner's love that may be transient.

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115 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 270.

116 This is somewhat of an ironic foreshadowing because Rachel will have children, but she will still die.

The similarities between Rachel and her relative Sarah and Rebekah are noteworthy. However, it is not clear how much Rachel and Leah would have known about the older women. Has Jacob told Rachel the circumstances surrounding his own birth? Has he told Rachel that his mother was previously infertile and was given the gift of conception because of Isaac's prayer initiative? These are the questions that an Akan reader asks of the characters in the narrative. What level of knowledge, if any at all, does Rachel have that infertility has been the challenge of Sarah and Rebekah, her relatives?

In traditional Akan society there is a strong belief in inherited traits, character and physical attributes. Consequently, preparation for marriage includes a sort of investigative process. The prospective in-laws vet the potential spouses to ascertain what dominant traits exist within their families. Oral histories of physical illness, spiritual activities and the personalities of deceased and living relatives were all regarded as pertinent information. Parents and elders will discourage their child from marrying into families in which particular kinds of illness or patterns of behaviour are identified due to the belief that the future children will inherit such traits or patterns.[117] We may compare this to the deceptive trait that some family members within the Genesis narrative demonstrate.[118] Conversely, when a man's family identifies positive traits within another family they strongly advise their son to marry a daughter of the family regardless of whether there is a romantic interest or attraction present.[119] The

117 This thought is still dominant even among Christians in Akan society. They still enlist the clergy and church elders, in addition to members of their own matrilineage, to help them carry out such investigations before the wedding.

118 The wife-sister narratives of Abraham and Isaac (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18; 26:1–11); Laban's deception, Rachel's theft of the teraphim; Jacob's sons deception of the Shechemites; Judah's deception of Tamar; Jacob's sons deception about Joseph being mauled to death etc. Studies investigating the deception and trickery motif in the HB began with Niditch's work, which identified this motif within West African and other cultures and saw similarities and difference within the biblical text. See, Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*. Also, for a development in this line of investigation see Williams, *Deception in Genesis*. Also, Nicholas, *The Trickster Revisited*.

119 At times a girl would be betrothed or promised in marriage before she was even of marriageable age solely based on the positive characteristics that a young boy's family saw in the girl's mother and other family members. When a man's parents "recognized that women from a particular home were hardworking, respectful and trust worthy, women from the house became a scarce commodity, therefore when girls were born into the house, people would rush to see the parents and engage them in marriage for their sons. They would look after such girls until they grew up and became the wives of their sons. Sometimes too some parents would betroth their daughters to good boys they saw in society"; Sarpong, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 23.

rationale for this customary investigation is that knowledge is key to success and that traits/patterns observed in several generations of a family may either help or haunt the prospective couple. The aim was to equip the couple and in-laws for a prosperous marriage.[120]

In Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel's narratives there is a connection between their beauty and their barrenness. All three women are described as beautiful, all three women struggle with infertility.[121] From an Akan perspective the women in this family have the dominant traits of beauty and barrenness that develops with each successive generation. Jacob's parents and Rachel's parents require no further investigation because they are confident that this maternal cousin marriage is ideal. The Genesis narrative highlights the reality that no one can be completely prepared for all the challenges that may arise, even in a marriage that is culturally regarded as ideal.

Rachel confronts and demands that Jacob give her children. The favoured wife anticipates that her doting husband will be as concerned about having children with her as she is with him. This is possibly another indirect criticism by the narrator whereby Jacob is contrasted with his father, Isaac. Isaac when faced with his wife's infertility prays for the circumstance to be resolved (Gen 25:21). Jacob's lack of financial preparation for marriage gives opportunity for Laban's deception,[122] but Jacob also seems to be unprepared for, and frankly oblivious to, the anguish underlying his favourite wife's complaint.

In contrast to her ancestress Sarah, Rachel does not figure YHWH as the cause of her barrenness. Jacob is angered, not so much by the fact that Rachel is giving a command but by the content of her words. Rachel ascribes him more responsibility for her fertility than he cares for. He responds, "am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen 30:2). This rhetorical question is really a rebuke.[123] In Jacob's mind it is clear; YHWH is responsible for Rachel's infertility and he does not want to take the place of God. While Rachel is unaware of, or not wanting to ascribe this experience to, divine activity, Jacob is confident in asserting a supernatural cause to this

120 As has been clarified in the introductory part of this book, marriage in ancient and many non-Western traditional cultures is seen as a union of families in addition to the couple.

121 Sarah (Gen 12:11, 14–15); Rebekah (Gen 24:16; 26:7); and Rachel (Gen 29:17).

122 One thinks that if Jacob had been well prepared for marriage and paid the bridewealth upfront then Laban would not have had occasion to deceive him. Of course, the irony is that Jacob is financially unprepared for marriage because he is a fugitive because of his own deception.

123 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 270.

biological predicament. In this marriage there are only two recorded emotions that Jacob has towards Rachel, passionate love and anger.

Infertility Solutions

Surrogacy

Unperturbed by Jacob's anger and his "don't blame me, blame God" response, Rachel has a retort. Issuing yet another command Rachel tells her husband that he must "go in to" her maid Bilhah. To strengthen her stance she states that Bilhah will deliver on her knees[124] so that "from her I too may be built" (Gen 30:3). This surrogate language,[125] and the wish to be "built" is evocative of Sarah's statement (Gen 16:2). Rachel is not so much concerned about her husband's line[126] as she is about her own legacy.

The solution of surrogacy employed by Sarah and Rachel would be a last resort for many Akan women. The reason being that everyone has an innate sense of loyalty to his or her matrilineage. Surrogacy, in this traditional worldview, complicates the question of one's "real" mother. Even in the Hebrew narrative it seems that surrogacy did not bring complete satisfaction precisely because Hagar, Zilpah and Bilhah's children seem to be distinguished by their "real" mothers.[127] However, for some Akan women the prospect of surrogate-born children not being accepted as "really" theirs is preferable to being regarded as completely barren.

Jacob has no reply to Rachel's surrogacy command; this time he simply does what he is told. In quick succession Bilhah becomes Jacob's wife; she is impregnated and gives birth to a son. The name of the newborn, Dan, intentionally

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124 In the ancient Near Eastern context, the knee was imagined to be "the seat of generative power," thus receiving a child on one's knees was an act of legitimating either biological or adoptive parentage; Sarna, *Genesis*, 207–08. While men speak of children being received on their knees, this language could also be midwifery imagery that Rachel is using.

125 While this may not be formal adoptive language used by adoptive Fathers in ANE, Arnold writes that this reflects "rather an ancient Near Eastern custom (attested in Hurrian and Neo-Assyrian texts) in which a surrogate mother welcomes and receives the newborn into the family by acts of attending the birth, naming, and breastfeeding"; Arnold, *Genesis*, 269. *Contra*, Hamilton who sees this as formal adoptive language; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 70. Also, Speiser suggests adoption view though he recognises that formal adoptive language is usually pronounced by the Father; Speiser, *Genesis*, 230.

126 If this were the case then she would be contented with the fact that he has already had four sons with Leah, her sister.

127 Cf. Gen 46:18, 25 where Zilpah and Bilhah's sons and grandchildren are mentioned distinctly from Leah and Rachel's sons and grandchildren.

tells a story. Rachel believes that God has judged her case,[128] and given a verdict in her favour resulting in this birth (Gen 30:6). Thus, Dan "he judged, vindicated" is Rachel's testimony. Again, Bilhah has another son for Jacob, or really for Rachel, and he is named Naphtali. The meaning of Naphtali offers the imagery of Rachel as a supernatural wrestler (נַפְתּוּלֵי אֱלֹהִים "the wrestlings of God") who overpowers her sister (Gen 30:8). To an extent, Rachel's speech here anticipates, even, portends Jacob's future wrestling with a supernatural man who seems to be identified with YHWH himself (Gen 32:24–32). The difference is that Jacob uses human strength to wrestle a supernatural "adversary," who is anonymous, while Rachel pictures herself as using supernatural strength to wrestle a human adversary, her sister. Rachel's naming of her surrogate-born children betrays her struggle with infertility, especially in the face of her sister's fecundity.

Natural Remedy

Even with the birth of two surrogate-born sons, Rachel is not wholly satisfied. This suggests that as customary and accepted as surrogacy was, it was still not tantamount to having one's own biological children. In order to achieve this experience, Rachel would soon try another solution; the use of natural remedies. Today, natural remedies for infertility have flooded the market in various traditional cultures. While access to Western biomedical care is often limited, or non-existent, in certain rural areas, natural remedies are abundant. Traditional narratives abound of various remedies that can reverse a variety of conditions that may impact one's fertility. Often, these are passed down in oral traditions and safeguarded by traditional priests and priestesses as well as those who practise herbal medicine. In the ancient world the use of natural remedies was far more prevalent and their efficacy far less suspected in comparison to many Western contexts where biomedicine is highly regarded.

During the wheat harvest[129] Reuben, Leah's firstborn son, finds mandrakes in the field and brings them to his mother (Gen 30:14). Mandrakes were

128 Who is Rachel's case against? Is it against Jacob because he is not as concerned for Rachel's fertility probably because he is sure of her prominence in his life? Or is Rachel's case against her sister Leah who is an opponent because Rachel is jealous of her fertility? It seems that Rachel pictures Leah as her opponent in divine court as she will soon make mention of prevailing against her sister.

129 The mention of the wheat harvest in the Ruth narrative is noted as a turning point that will change the story from being one of infertility and emptiness to one of fertility and fullness (Ruth 2:23).

believed to be an aphrodisiac[130] and an aid in conception.[131] They were also used for general medicinal purposes.[132] Magico-medical powers were also ascribed to the plant because its roots reportedly looked like a human form.[133] Whatever the extent of the mandrakes' effectiveness Rachel obviously believed that they would be of great help. The younger sister who has been jealous and "supernaturally wrestling" her sister in her mind now puts that aside and asks if she can have the mandrakes. "Both wives desire the mandrakes, but for different reasons."[134] Leah needs it as an aphrodisiac, while Rachel wants it as a fertility aid.

Leah's first direct speech in this narrative is her reply to her little sister's petition. "Is it a small matter for you to take my husband? And would you take my son's mandrakes also?" (Gen 30:15) Obviously, Leah feels that Rachel has taken away her husband and now wants to take something from her son. Again, unperturbed by strong emotion when she wants something (cf. Gen 30:2–3), Rachel makes a bargain. Jacob will sleep with Leah for one night in exchange for the mandrakes.

Rachel's ability to meet her side of the bargain with Leah is actually dependent on Jacob accomplishing her wish. Yet Rachel is apparently confident that Jacob will concede. Does this suggest that Rachel is the instigator behind the cessation of Jacob and Leah's sexual relationship? If this is the case, then Jacob wants to continue his intimate relationship with Leah but has terminated it because of protests from his favourite wife. If this is not the case, then the cessation of conjugal relations between Jacob and Leah is a product of Jacob's initiative. At this point Jacob is an object to be bartered,[135] he is not the main

130 Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 56.

131 Seeman, "'Where Is Sarah Your Wife?'," 116. Stol cautions that there may not have been a direct causal link between mandrakes and fertility because there are only a few extra-biblical examples to indicate that ancient Near Eastern peoples popularly used mandrakes as a conception aid. Rather, mandrakes were probably used as an aphrodisiac (Song 7:14) that increased sexual encounters which then indirectly increased the possibility for fertility; Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 57.

132 Mandrakes were reputed to have "emetic, purgative and narcotic substances"; Sarna, *Genesis*, 209.

133 Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, 56.

134 Turner, *Genesis*, 131.

135 Jacob has no voice but serves the wishes of his sororal wives. This is ironic because while Jacob is to be served as a lord by his older brother Esau (according to his birth oracle and also the firstborn-blessing given by Isaac) he ends up serving not only Laban but also his two wives Leah and Rachel; Turner, "Disappointed Expectations," 56.

focus of this narrative.[136] The exchange of sex and mandrakes is meant to stand out and magnifies the characterisation of Leah as the lovelorn wife and Rachel as the loved but unsatisfied wife.

Sororal solidarity is significant within matrilineal cultures. From an Akan viewpoint Rachel is not an ideal wife, not only because of her infertility, but also because she sabotages her own sister. That Rachel does not collaborate with her older sister but rather intercepts Leah's opportunity to conceive more children is destructive.[137] In a matrilineal society your sister's children are also regarded as your own children. In this sense the more children Leah had would also have added to Rachel's honour and future security. It may also be argued that Jacob's passion for Rachel is sustained primarily *because* of Leah's fecundity. Jacob is not greatly concerned by Rachel's infertility because her older sister is birthing heirs for him. The exchange of sex and mandrakes while indicating apparent collaboration instead uncovers two sisters offering the other something they feel will be of less value than what they themselves are getting in return. After all, Rachel may think, what good is one night to an unloved wife? Leah may ask, what good is a mandrake to an infertile wife? This is not sororal solidarity but sororal discord, every sister for herself.

In giving up her husband for one night, however, Rachel worsens her predicament and creates more opportunity for jealousy to grow for "God listened to Leah, and she conceived another son" (Gen 30:17). Furthermore, this bargaining incident reunites Leah and Jacob on other occasions because subsequently Leah conceives and delivers a sixth son and a daughter. Notably Dinah's name is a feminine form of Dan, the name that Rachel gave to her first son born by the surrogate Bilhah (Gen 30:6).[138] Rachel felt vindicated at the birth of her firstborn by surrogacy, Leah feels vindicated at the birth of her last child.

Barrenness Reversed

The length of Rachel's barrenness lasts for several years. There is nothing that Rachel can do to reverse her barrenness, neither is there anything that Jacob can do. Unlike his father, there is no mention of Jacob praying for Rachel to

136 Although often referred to as the "Jacob cycle," because he received the promise, it seems that in this particular section the three key characters are Yahweh, Leah and Rachel; Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 163.

137 For more on Rachel's role in Leah's social barrenness see chapter 6 "Leah & Michal: Estranged Wives."

138 This may be an indirect rebuttal from Leah to Rachel. Rachel named her first son, born by a surrogate, Dan. Leah births her sons; natural and surrogate, then has a daughter who is named with the feminine form of Dan, Dinah.

have children. Rachel's jealousy, the surrogacy, and her bargain for Reuben's mandrakes do not give her the full satisfaction of motherhood that she craves.

Finally, with three actions Rachel's circumstance is changed. "Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb" (Gen 30:32). The act of God remembering a person means that a significant event is about to occur.[139] Rachel does not become pregnant because of the mandrakes but because YHWH opens her womb.[140] Rachel's reliance on the mandrakes reveals her desperation. The favoured wife makes three attempts to resolve childlessness. First, she appeals to Jacob to give her a child. Second, she initiates the strategy of surrogacy. Third, she employs the use of natural remedy. When YHWH intervenes to resolve the infertility he matches Rachel's actions with three steps; he remembers, listens and then opens Rachel's womb (Gen 30:22).[141]

The phenomenon of sibling rivalry in which the younger becomes the prominent and stronger figure is a motif evident within the HB. Syren calls this "the forsaken firstborn" motif in which the rights and privileges of Ishmael, Esau, Reuben and Manasseh as firstborn sons are conferred on their younger brothers.[142] Rachel and Leah's relationship provides an interesting counterpart to this motif, which is focused almost always on male siblings. Rachel is the younger sibling who is in the tragic situation of barrenness but overcomes to be the mother of Joseph and Benjamin. Yet, this sibling motif in which Rachel becomes more prominent than her sister is not favourable in Akan culture. Leah must be the favoured and prominent sister because she is the most fertile.[143] In this traditional culture it is not a woman's beauty but the children she can bear, first for her matrilineage, and second for her husband, that will bring her honour and prestige.

While Rachel only has two children it can be argued that Jacob regards these two children more highly than the others. Rachel's firstborn, Joseph, is a special

139 God remembered Noah and the deluge subsided (Gen 8:1). God remembered Abraham and subsequently Lot and his family were saved despite the destruction of their city (Gen 19:29). God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery (Exod 2:24). Yahweh remembered Hannah and she delivers a baby boy (1 Sam 1:19). Rachel and Hannah are the only barren women who are the direct objects of "God remembered." It is said of Sarah that Yahweh visited or took note (פָּקַד) of her (Gen 21:1).

140 Matthews and Mims, "Jacob the Trickster and Heir of the Covenant," 189.

141 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 173.

142 Syrén, *The Forsaken First-Born*, 11.

143 There will be more discussion of Leah in the second part of this study, "Social Barrenness."

child who ultimately saves the family from certain death when his position as ruler in Egypt enables him to provide rations and residency for them during the famine. Rachel names her sons, in contrast to Sarah and Rebekah, and the name given to her firstborn anticipates the birth of other children. However, Rachel's hope is cut short in that she gives birth to only one more son. The double etymology of Joseph's name, *'asaf* (to take away) and *yosef* (to add), not only describes Rachel's life (shame has been taken away and may YHWH add more sons to me)[144] but it is also prophetic of Joseph's life. Joseph will be taken away from his homeland but he will add prosperity to his family.[145] His birth also marks a turning point in Jacob's life. It is when Rachel gives birth to Joseph that Jacob decides it is time to move away from Laban (Gen 30:25). Rachel's fertility has an impact on her family's location. Thus, while her infertility lasts for years Rachel ends up usurping her sister's place and even in her death she is able to secure a part in Jacob's life that Leah cannot.[146]

Rachel does not have problem conceiving her second son but ironically it will be her penchant for children that will prove fatal for her (Gen 35:16–20). On the journey from Bethel to Bethlehem Rachel endures a very difficult labour. The attending midwife tells Rachel that she is delivering another son. The Hebrew suggests that this was not a predictive statement but a description of what the midwife saw in the present. How did the midwife know that it was a son before the baby was fully delivered? The midwife could ascertain the sex of the baby because it had presented itself feet or buttocks first, meaning that the genital emerges before the baby has been completely delivered. Rachel's obstetrical complication was that she delivered the baby breech.[147] As Rachel was dying from complications of a breech birth she named her son בֶּן־אוֹנִי (son of my sorrow) (Gen 35:18). The naming of children to reflect the sad circumstances connected to their birth is known in the ancient world and in current traditional cultures. In the Akan context there is a name for a child whose father dies before his birth "*Anto*,"[148] but there is no equivalent for one whose

144 Sarna, *Genesis*, 210.

145 Also, Benjamin is a key part of Joseph's plot to assess his brothers' motives and characters after years of estrangement (Gen 43:29–44:15).

146 For Fischer, "the renaming of the child in the presence of his dying mother is a last proof of Jacob's love for his darling Rachel. The child will go through life with a memorial name recalling the beloved wife. Benjamin, the son of the right wife, is the only one of the twelve sons who is born in the right Land"; Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God*, 89.

147 Blondheim and Blondheim, "Obstetrical and Lexicographical Complications," 15.

148 Meaning, he (the child) did not come and meet (the father); Agyekum, "The Sociolinguistic of Akan Personal Names," 220.

mother dies while giving birth, which is strange since it would seem reasonable to have an equivalent name in a matrilineal culture. Such a name could draw sympathy for the bearer and prompt generosity on behalf of those who heard the name. However, the name could also provoke prejudice and other maltreatment. Perhaps it is to avoid this negative attention that Jacob renames the child בִּנְיָמִין (son of the right).

Rachel is the only barren turned fertile wife to die due to childbirth. Rachel's penchant for fertility proves to be fatal. Throughout history many women have continued bearing children even at the risk of their health and/or life. Traditionally in Akan culture the thought of dying childless was more tragic than the prospect of dying in childbirth. Rachel, like many other women throughout history, experiences that a penchant for fertility can prove to be fatal.

Conclusion to Rachel's Narrative

The chiastic structure of Gen 29:1–31:55 places the birth of Jacob's children (Gen 29:31–30:24) at the apex.[149] This is noteworthy since the apex has been reached only through the slippery slopes of infertility. The power that enables attainment of motherhood's summit is YHWH. Through the narrative's description of infertility the social strands of unrequited love and sororal disconnect become more prominent. Rachel's narrative, perhaps more than any other, suggests that in this ANE context a husband's great affection for his wife may not always have sufficed as a substitute for children.

Rachel's character develops in complex ways. At the beginning of her story she is the eager shepherdess who runs to announce the arrival of a strange relative (Gen 29:12). At the end of her story she is the victim of maternal mortality caused by breech birth (Gen 35:16–19). If Leah's beauty is contrasted with Rachel's, then we may also say that Rachel's character is contrasted with Leah's. In her lifetime, Rachel is neither completely a victim nor a villain, but someone in-between. The suspicion looms that Rachel is the instigator behind the cessation of Jacob and Leah's sexual union, and this is why she is so confident that Jacob will sleep with Leah if given the opportunity (Gen 30:14–16). Rachel explored the options of surrogacy and natural remedies in order to solve her infertility.[150] However, these options do not bring about results that bring com-

149 Arnold, *Genesis*, 264.

150 Additionally, even once Rachel has a child she aims to secure the child's place in his father's family. Spanier shows how it is possible that Rachel's theft of the *teraphim*

plete fulfilment. Rachel earlier commented on wanting a child to the point of death. The bitter irony is that it is precisely the fulfilment of her desire, not its denial, which brings about her death.

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was about securing the prominence of her son Joseph; Spanier, "Rachel's Theft of the Teraphim," 405. Yet, we may also wonder if the theft of the *teraphim* is another one of Rachel's fertility methods, this time because she wants a second child. Perhaps she steals the *teraphim* anticipating expedient fertility help rather than YHWH's delayed intervention.

CHAPTER 5

Infertility in the Former Prophets

Introduction

The following group of infertility narratives appear in the Former Prophets section within the HB. The infertility experiences of Manoah's wife (Judg 13), Hannah (1 Sam 1) and the Great Woman of Shunem (2 Kgs 4) will be examined. These stories highlight the social consequences of childlessness, whether it is the relationship dynamic between wives and husbands or rival wives. Each woman's action or inaction as it relates to their childlessness represents the various ways in which ancient women may have coped with this condition. It is not only the social consequences but also the spiritual dimension that is also essential to the barrenness tradition. In one instance the cause of barrenness is attributed directly to YHWH while in the others no presented cause exists. The method through which YHWH reverses barrenness is different for each of the barren wives but is preceded by an announcement by YHWH's representative. This chapter will begin with a twist in the barrenness tradition, the narrative of Manoah's wife.

The Narrative of Manoah's Wife: A Twist in the Tradition

Manoah's wife's narrative is unique among the other barrenness narratives. Judges 13 presents a twist in the tradition of the barrenness wives. Here we find a few combined elements that seem to cut against the grain of the infertility tradition. Neither Mrs Manoah nor her husband protest or seek remedy for infertility at the onset of the narrative.[1] No personal prayer or wish, by her or a spouse, is recorded. Manoah's wife does not receive the intermediation of a human religious figure (cf. 2 Kgs 4:14) neither does she visit a sanctuary site (cf. 1 Sam 1:9). There is no rival wife, surrogacy plan or talk of experiencing shame.[2] Another twist in the tradition is evidenced in Samson's twisted locks that broadcast his nazirite devotion but also signal, depending on whether they

1 There is a variation of this element in the narrative of the Great Woman of Shunem. However, so far in the barrenness tradition Manoah's wife is the first to display this divergence.

2 A rival wife, surrogacy plan or talk of experiencing shame are also absent in the narratives of Rebekah and the Great woman of Shunem.

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are grown or shorn, either the presence or departure of YHWH. Mrs Manoah's choice of name for her miracle child also signals a deviation from the naming of other children of previously infertile women. Further, Mrs Manoah is the only woman who is given strict pregnancy prescriptions because of her child's nazirite vocation.

This narrative contributes to the barrenness tradition[3] in that it demonstrates that when YHWH gives a miracle child he also has the right to make a total claim on the child's life.[4] This is why Samson is designated as a nazirite from the womb, even though this nazirite vow was to be chosen by, and not imposed upon, a devotee (Num 6:2). The absolute claim that YHWH makes on the child's life, and Samson's nazirite dedication, raises certain elements that will be highlighted throughout Samson's life (Judg 14–16).

Through the words, actions, dialogue and narration in Judg 13 it will be seen that this infertility narrative is focused more on the devotion of the coming child than any other barrenness narrative. It is in this way that the divine initiative, extreme nazirite stipulations, Manoah's incessant questioning about the son's vocation and the closing scene at the altar make sense. Unlike the other barrenness narratives, this narrative is less concerned with the experience of the soon-to-be parents and more about the life and vocation of the coming child.

Setting the Scene of Barrenness

The infertility experience of Manoah's wife is set within Israel's forty-year subjugation to the Philistines (Judg 13:1). This subjugation has a clear initiator; "Yahweh gave them into the hands of the Philistines" because of the consistent reality "the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of Yahweh" (Judg 13:1).

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3 Form criticism first identified the birth narrative form before it was referred to as a type-scene by Alter "A) a pious but barren woman (who longs for a son) is introduced. B) She receives a divine revelation/visitation announcing the conception of a special child and/or the special destiny of the child. C) The birth is announced. D) The child is named"; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 395–96. Also, Niditch adds that these annunciation scenes are "a form of theophany" and usually consist of "the news for the woman, delivered by the deity or his emissary; particular instructions and information about the boy; an offering of sacrifice; the allusion to a divine name or identity; a miraculous passage revealing or sealing the importance of the event; and an expression of awe or fear on the part of those who experience the visitation"; Niditch, *Judges*, 142.

4 We see this also in the *Akedah* of Isaac (Gen 22).

A theme permeates the book of Judges; the vicious cycle of sin turns into a downward spiral as time progresses.[5] It can be seen that things are progressively getting worse since at this point in their history "Israel does not even cry to Yahweh for relief from oppression."[6] This conquest by the Philistines will be an important background for the present narrative. The expected child will be closely linked with the foreign power.

The element of undefined time is used as a literary device in Judg 13. The narrator only gives one specific time-span; that is the forty-year subjugation to the Philistines (Judg 13:2). Other than this, the narrator does comment on when or how long Manoah and his wife have been married or the duration of their childlessness. This vagueness concerning time periods poses two possible scenarios. Either Manoah and his wife have not long been married and therefore it is not too much of a great concern for them[7] or perhaps they have been married for a very long time and have therefore given up any hope of fertility. Neither scenario can be proven from the narrator's sparse information on time.

The geographical setting of the narrative is Zorah, in the territory of Dan (Judg 13:2). In Joshua it is associated with both the tribes of Judah and Dan (Josh 15:33; 19:41). The Danites are thought to have occupied this area first before it later became a Judahite town.[8] This setting is significant because it exemplifies the fluidity between geographical boundaries in the whole of Samson's narrative. The spirit of YHWH begins לְפַעֲמוֹ "to disturb him"[9] in Mahaneh-dan, a camp between Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg 13:25). Later Samson meets Delilah in the Valley of Sorek that is "the boundary between Israelite

5 See Boda's six stage cycle: 1) Sin (Judg 2:11a; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). 2) Discipline (2:12, 14, 20; 3:8, 14; 4:2, 3; 6:1; 10:7, 8; 13:1). 3) Distress (2:15, 18; 3:9, 15; 4:3; 6:6, 7; 10:9, 10). 4) Salvation (2:16,18; 3:9,10, 15, 30; 4:23, 24; 6:12, 34; 8:28; 9:23; 10:1; 11:29, 32, 33; 12:3; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 16:25, 30). 5) Rest (2:18; 3:11, 30; 4:31; 8:28; 10:2, 3; 12:7; 15:20; 16:31). 6) Death (2:19; 3:11; 4:1; 8:32–33; 10:2, 5; 12:7; 16:30–31). For the nuances in phrasing in each cycle stage see Boda, "Recycling Heaven's Words," 44–45.

6 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 110.

7 Although extant ANE sources show that a couple were often encouraged to conceive as soon as their wedding night, as can be seen in marriage blessings; Lines 300–304, Lambert and Millard, *Atra-Ḫasīs*, 65. Thus, there may not have been any concept of "too soon" when it came to conceiving in marriage, and this can be seen in "a probationary period, within which conception was to take place"; Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 73.

8 Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 350.

9 Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 359. Also Alter notes that usual translation "to move" is too soft and leaves out the stronger connotation of the verb, which he feels is best translated here as "to drive"; Alter, "Samson without Folklore," 49.

and Philistine territory."[10] Samson's disregard for his nazirite dedication, are perhaps exemplified in his restless movements between territories that are Israelite, Philistine or on the boundaries of both.

With temporal and geographical settings identified the narrative moves on to present the complication of plot. The woman,[11] Manoah's wife "was barren and had borne no *children*" (Judg 13:2). This statement highlights the plot's complication; this woman "cannot even try to fulfil Israel's maternal ideal" due to her infertility.[12] The plot is complicated but a theophany presents a possible resolution.

The First Theophany

Mrs Manoah's namelessness and barrenness, however, do not disqualify her from YHWH's notice.[13] In fact it is her namelessness that ties her and the Angel of YHWH together.[14] Interrupting her human situation, the Angel of YHWH appears to Mrs Manoah. In some other barrenness narratives, the woman (or her husband) recognises or laments the childless situation before a theophany or revelation occurs.[15] Yet, in Judg 13 "the angel appears to the woman for no apparent reason."[16] Manoah's wife does not lament her barrenness so it is strange that she experiences a theophany before a prior complaint.[17]

In Akan culture childless women would consult traditional priests and shrines in order to remedy their situation. Mrs Manoah and her husband's lack of protest of, perhaps even satisfaction with, their childless state is puzzling from this cultural perspective. There is no clue in the narrative that Manoah's wife wishes to move into the next rite of passage; motherhood. In a traditional culture like that of ancient Israel, as with the other ANE cultures, this is unusual. Women were socialised for fertility. It is unclear what exact marriage

10 Smith, "Delilah," 94.

11 In extra-biblical texts Manoah's wife is given a few names; Eluma, Zlelponith or Hazlelponi; Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 30.

12 Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 185.

13 "Under ordinary circumstances these factors would indicate that she is powerless and despised within her household and among her people. Yet it is to her that the angel appears twice"; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 140.

14 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 29.

15 Ackerman highlights an interesting contrast to barrenness in the Ugaritic legend of Aqhat where it is the husband who is sterile; Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 192.

16 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 10.

17 Manoah's wife and the Shunammite woman share this element within the tradition of the barrenness stories; they are approached and promised a child without a recorded verbal lament of their situation.

blessings were said over couples in this time period in Israel, however, as we have seen in the ANE literature conception beginning on the wedding night was likely encouraged. In an Akan perspective, Manoah's wife would be viewed as an unusual woman who is satisfied with her childless circumstance. Additionally, that Manoah does not take a second wife is also remarkable from an Akan perspective. Manoah belongs to a patrilineal culture in which a man could marry an additional wife so as to perpetuate his lineage so why does he not do so? In Akan culture, even if a couple were to accept their childlessness they would likely try to adopt a child to whom they could give a "good name" and better life prospects. An Akan reader queries why Manoah and his wife have not explored adoption or surrogacy as remedies for infertility.

Since Manoah's wife neither laments her childlessness, nor displays great emotion when she finally conceives and gives birth, it has been suggested that this "implies that her fertility was seen by her in a positive light."[18] Whatever their emotional or rational reactions to their childless circumstance, Manoah and his wife's selection to be parents may also foreshadow their unborn son's lack of input into his nazirite calling.

Manoah's wife is the first childless woman to have a private encounter with the Angel of YHWH. Upon arrival the divine emissary states the obvious by reiterating her childless state (Judg 13:3). The narrator likely uses this repetition to create more contrast to what the angel says next, "but you shall conceive and give birth to a son" (Judg 13:3). Due to the woman's pending pregnancy she is not to drink wine יַיִן or strong drink וְשֵׁכָר or to eat anything unclean טָמֵא (Judg 13:4). Again the angel repeats 'you shall conceive and give birth to a son." Now he moves from what she should not do during pregnancy to what she should not do once her baby boy is delivered. No razor must cut the hair on his head because "the boy shall be a nazirite to God from the womb" (Judg 13:5).

Nazirite Dedication

The nazirite dedication of the promised child involves discussion of drink, food, hair and vocation. The angel's instruction to the woman draws from the tradition of Naziritehood found in Num 6. A נָזִיר nazirite was a consecrated person or devotee, who could be a male or female. The vow was extraordinary by virtue of its difficult nature; יַפְלִא לִנְדֹּר (Num 6:2). Nazirites were to abstain from wine, strong drink, vinegar made from wine or strong drink, fresh grapes, dried grapes and anything derived from the skin to the seed of the grape (Num 6:3–4). For a time a nazirite was not to cut his hair with a razor (Num 6:5). Furthermore, impurity caused by going near a corpse was to be avoided, even if it was the

18 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 30.

corpse of one's father, mother, brother or sister. The reason for this was that נֵזֶר אֱלֹהָיו עַל־רֹאשׁוֹ "his nazirite devotion/separation to God is on his head" (Num 6:7).

Manoah's wife is told not to eat any unclean thing (Judg 13:4). However, unclean eating is not mentioned in Num 6, the only reference to uncleanness is the state caused by proximity to a corpse (Num 6:6–12). Maybe Num 6 assumes knowledge of the dietary laws in Lev 11. Why is unclean eating specifically mentioned within this narrative? Perhaps it is a foreshadowing of Samson later eating honey from the carcass of a lion (Judg 14:8–9).[19] In Judg 13 the woman must exceed the requirements of the "normative" nazirite code (Num 6), this can be seen in the addition of no unclean eating.

Samson is called to a vocation by divine choice before he is even born and able to accept or reject the call.[20] This extreme call is probably because "at a point in the book when the Israelites have fully acquiesced with Philistine rule and when deliverance seems out of the question … extraordinary measures are necessary."[21] Furthermore, Samson will be doubly consecrated for his vocation; as a firstborn son and an ordained nazirite at conception.[22]

An important element of the nazirite devotion was that the hair[23] itself, not just the person, was also considered to be sacred (Num 6:18). Extant ANE

19 Samson is characterised as a person who skirts rules and boundaries for his convenience and indulgence. Technically, this dead lion is a carcass not a corpse and so it raises a question as to whether Samson has or has not violated the nazirite stipulation.

20 Although, a survey of the calls given in the HB, also highlights a problematic element of just how free the individuals are to reject the call. Jeremiah, for instance, feels compelled almost to the exclusion of his free choice (Jer 20:7–18).

21 McCann, *Judges*, 98.

22 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 111. Cf. Exod 13:2, 12; 22:29; Num 3:13.

23 Within the HB we may see some general ways in which hair is important. Shaving the beard or hair around the temples was prohibited for the Israelites (Lev 19:27). A shaved head was a sign of mourning or horror (Deut 21:12–13; Job 1:20; Isa 15:2; Jer 41:5; 47:5; 48:37; Ezek 7:18; Amos 8:10), purification (Lev 14:8–9) or of public humiliation and divine judgment (Isa 7:20). Therefore, Priests were to trim their hair to keep it from growing too long by trimming it but were not to shave their heads (Lev 21:5; Ezek 44:20). Natural baldness was not to be looked down upon (Lev 13:40–41) as opposed to making oneself bald as part of rituals for the dead (Lev 21:5; Deut 14:1). When Elisha's natural baldness is a mocked by a group of youths, they are cursed and some are mauled to death by she-bears (2 Kgs 2:23–24). Long hair could also be seen as a sign of prolonged madness as is the case with Nebuchadnezzar's hair, described as being long like eagles' feathers (Dan 4:33). The manipulation of hair could also be used as prophetic sign-acts (Jer 7:29; Ezek 5:1–4).

texts record occasional cases of children being dedicated to cultic service.[24] However, these sources do not describe the hair of these devotees. Within the HB Samson's hair is given more weight than any other character.[25] Sacred hair may be further explored by briefly examining this connection between devotion and hairstyle in a traditional culture.

Samson's long hair was sectioned into seven plaits or locks (Judg 16:19).[26] Unique among other nazirites, Samson's hair was not only a sign of his devotion but was mysteriously connected with physical strength (Judg 16:19). In addition to his nazirite vow Samson's long hair could also have been a sign of his warrior status as there may have been such a trend, as in the case of Absalom.[27]

Samson's hair may serve an additional narrative purpose in the context of the Philistine occupation. Philistines, "sea peoples" who came to settle in this area around the twelfth century BCE, raised and ate pigs and the men preferred to be clean-shaven.[28] If indeed, the Philistines had a preference for less body hair (including hair on the head, as well as the face) then hair may be "an important way in which the Israelite author reflects upon Israelite identity and culturally demarcates his people from the uncircumcised 'other.' That the enemy is Philistine makes Samson's never cutting his hair especially important."[29]

It is not explicitly mentioned that Samson drinks or eats any grape product or fermented drink.[30] Neither is it specifically stated that he defiles himself with a corpse.[31] Samson receives no immediate judgment for these. It is only when his hair is shorn that he is disciplined with the departure of YHWH and punishment of the Philistines (Judg 16:20–21).

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24 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 136. Also, Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 48–49.

25 Perhaps the only other character that follows closely behind is Prince Absalom. Absalom's hair is noted for being long as it was cut once per year due to its heaviness (2 Sam 14:26). Like Samson, Absalom's hair plays a role in his demise. It is Absalom's hair that gets caught in tree branches (2 Sam 18:9) leaving him vulnerable to repeated stabbing by Joab and his soldiers (2 Sam 18:14–15).

26 Mobley argues that these seven locks are "an Israelite variation on the six locks of the *lahmu*" a Mesopotamian iconographic wild man; Mobley, "The Wild Man in the Bible and the Ancient Near East," 231.

27 Niditch, *Judges*, 170. Also, Niditch, *My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man*, 65–69.

28 Niditch, *Judges*, 144.

29 Niditch, *Judges*, 145. For further detail on the connection between hair, identity and religious ritual see, Niditch, *My Brother Esau Is a Hairy Man*.

30 He does hold a מִשְׁתֶּה (drinking feast), which raises the suspicion that he is partaking in the merriment and violating his vow (Judg 14:10).

31 It is instead a carcass of a lion (Judg 14:8–9).

The hair was important because according to the nazirite code, the hair itself was dedicated not just the person (Num 6:18). The shaving of the hair was the final ritual, on the part of the devotee, that ended the nazirite vow (Num 6:18).[32] In this way Samson terminates his lifelong nazirite vow, hence why "YHWH departed from him" (Judg 16:19–20). What is introduced as a brief comment in Judg 13 appears as a leitmotif within Samson's narrative. Samson's locks of hair are the physical sign of YHWH's absolute claim on his life.

Sons gained through consultation of Akan traditional priests or priestesses were at times dedicated to the shrines and trained as priests. The devotee was given directives to ensure his moral purity and these instructions were "both peculiar to the deity and essentially applicable to other trainees elsewhere."[33] It was imperative that these miracle children have a physical mark to convey that their birth was a result of divine intervention. Customarily, this physical sign was the growing and adorning of the child's hair.[34] This was "regarded as a mark of dedication to the deity."[35] The link between hair and sacred devotion, demonstrated in the growing of locks, is seen as important in Akan traditional religion.[36]

Aside from the hair guideline, the other information the angel gives concerning the boy is that he "shall begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judg 13:5). It has been claimed that since Mrs Manoah did not "initiate action in order to counter her infertility," the angel's visit and list of all

32 The Priest was the one who initiated anything else remaining—it is the Priest who places the boiled ram's shoulder, one unleavened cake and one unleavened wafer in the devotee's palms as a wave offering (Num 6:19–20). The nazirite would first bring an offering to YHWH: a year-old male lamb for burnt offering; a year-old female lamb for a sin offering; a ram for a peace offering; a basket of unleavened cakes and unleavened wafers (made with fine flour and oil, the oil was to be mixed into the cakes while oil was spread onto the wafers); a grain offering; and a drink offering (Num 6:13–17).

33 Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 43.

34 "The hair in such cases is allowed to grow long and to the strands is fastened every conceivable charm"; Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 65. Cowrie shells were widely used to adorn hair.

35 Ekem, *Priesthood in Context*, 43. Interestingly, research by cultural anthropologists show that Caribbean Rastafarians who have recently migrated to Ghana saw that Ghanaians were interpreting Rastafarian dreadlocks based on the previously mentioned Akan concept. This is due in part to the fact that Rastafarian dreadlocks were "similar to a coiled hairstyle with a range of ritualistic meanings, including its cultural marking as a hairstyle of fetish priests and of children conceived through the assistance of such fetish priests"; White, "Living in Zion," 68.

36 McLeod, *The Asante*, 64. McLeod comments that in non-religious contexts matted long hair is worn by royal hangmen and may be interpreted as a sign of madness.

prohibitions connected with her future pregnancy and child rearing is forceful and dictatorial.[37] Furthermore, this imposition of prohibitions on the woman and her future son, some have conjectured, becomes the catalyst for Samson's indulgent and excessive lifestyle.[38] The angel explains the future son's vocation; he will *begin* to deliver Israel. The reference to the Philistines brings in the political aspect of Samson's vocation in addition to the spiritual nazirite vow.

After hearing the angel's prophecy, which contained instruction on drink, food, hair and vocation, the woman does not engage in any dialogue.[39] The abbreviations, omissions and additions evident in Mrs Manoah's incident report are noteworthy. When she reports the theophany to Manoah, it becomes apparent that there is gap in her knowledge; she does not know the origin or identity of the visitor. She believes he is a man of God, whose נוֹרָא מְאֹד "exceedingly awesome" appearance makes him look like an "angel of God" (Judg 13:6).[40] Her lack of knowledge functions as a clue; if this were a human man he would have conformed to a cultural greeting custom that probably would have included giving a name as well as his place of origin.[41]

There is another significant element within Mrs Manoah's report. She abbreviates and omits the angel's prohibition concerning the razor as well as the important fact that the future son will begin to deliver Israel from Philistine occupation (Judg 13:7). Is this a lapse of her memory? She also adds a phrase that the angel did not say, that the boy will be a nazirite "to the day of his death" (Judg 13:7). Did she subconsciously infer this from the prophecy thinking that the angel did not complete the merism "womb to the tomb"? Or perhaps Manoah's wife knows that the angel does not infer this but this is her own wish as a mother that her son's vow will be for the duration of his life. Mrs Manoah's addition of "until the day of his death" (Judg 13:7) was either an honest interpretation of the angel's words or, it wasn't and therefore, later

37 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 171.

38 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 171.

39 "Instead of expressing amazement or humility before the divine messenger, the narrator describes her rushing to her husband to share the good news"; Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 111.

40 Block notes that it is curious that the woman makes reference to an angel of God and wonders if she had ever seen an angel before as to why Mrs Manoah connects this man with an angel; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 404.

41 In traditional cultures, formal greetings are of utmost importance. In the Akan culture, if a visitor arrives in a place he will give both his name, his place of origin as well as the purpose for his journey to the present location. It is in these formal greetings that visitors can obtain information that can be useful and where locals have the opportunity to extend hospitality.

she may have even been "responsible for later problems in the hero's life, as were the mothers of Abimelech and Jephthah."[42] By adding to, and omitting from, what the angel told her when she reports to her husband, Manoah's wife "virtually takes on the predictive or prophetic role of the angel by extending the Nazirite vow to encompass her son's entire life."[43] Some have pondered the question as to whether Mrs Manoah was a nazirite herself.[44] It seems more likely, however, that any observance of nazirite standards was advised only due to the fact that a mother's actions and nutrition affects her unborn child.[45]

While Manoah is the only named character in the narrative he is ironically a minor personality when compared with his wife and the angel.[46] That the divine emissary appears first to Manoah's wife on both occasions has led some to conclude that this is a comical story of a foolish husband who follows his wife's lead due to his own lack of leadership.[47]

Scholars have described Manoah as a "colourless and marginal,"[48] "schlemiel"[49] who is outdone by his wife's "superior intelligence."[50] Manoah is an example of what not to do; meddling in an encounter between Yahweh and a mother-to-be only highlights the "mistakes and excesses of a man."[51] Among the husbands in the barrenness stories, Manoah and the Shunammite Woman's husband are alike. Not all the husbands of barren wives are active characters; however, Mobley counters that in other narratives "the father of the child is merely absent or peripheral,"[52] but here Manoah stands out amongst all the husbands because he is "present and conspicuously ineffectual."[53] Manoah is

42 Schneider, *Judges*, 198.

43 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 31.

44 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 31. Differently, Webb believes that the call of Samson, through his mother, foreshadows the prominent function that women will play in his life; Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 44.

45 Scalise, "'I Have Produced a Man with the Lord'," 582.

46 Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, 86. O'Connell asserts that Manoah is in direct contrast with his wife, for she serves as "a foil to Manoah"; O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 218.

47 Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 174. Alter calls this "a tale of male obtuseness"; Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 123.

48 Amit, "'Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife' (Judges 13:11)," 148.

49 Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 155.

50 Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 156.

51 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 164.

52 Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, 87.

53 Mobley, *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East*, 87.

criticised by interpreters for his flat personality, and is thought to be the epitome of doubt and unbelief.[54]

Although Manoah is introduced before his wife at the onset of the narrative, it is only now that he really becomes involved. Upon hearing the report Manoah prays to YHWH, "please let the man of God whom you have sent come to us again that he may teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born" (Judg 13:8). The verb וַיֶּעְתַּר "then he entreated" is also used of Isaac (Gen 25:21) when he, on behalf of his wife, prays to YHWH for a child. The motives behind Manoah's prayer have received much speculation. Manoah may not have believed his wife's report but rather suspected that a strange man had been socialising with his wife or Manoah may have believed that this was indeed a man of God but felt snubbed that he had not been the one to be approached first.[55]

Whatever his feelings toward his wife may have been, Manoah seems to think that YHWH is the one who has sent the "man of God" and wants him to come again so as to teach/instruct them what to do for the future son (Judg 13:8). Besides what his wife has already told him Manoah wants to know if there is more. The fact that he asks to be taught, and not simply told, is key because he wants to know as much as possible in order to parent this special child. Some, following the early interpretation of Josephus,[56] believe that Manoah was jealous of his wife's interaction with the stranger and that this is what motivates his request for the subsequent visit.[57]

The Second Theophany

Despite the leaning to characterise Manoah negatively, it seems that his prayer must be sincere in some respect because his prayer is answered.[58] Although the angel once again appears first to Mrs Manoah, we know that the reason for a second theophany is due to Manoah's prayer, "God listened to the voice of Manoah" (Judg 13:9). "The angel of God" appears to Mrs Manoah while she is sitting alone; again her husband is not with her (Judg 13:9). Commenting on the fact that twice Mrs Manoah is alone in the field Matthews proposes that this is perhaps an indication that "she is so despised that her fate is of little

54 "Manoah is characterized as being incredulous, if not cynical, about the angelic visitation—a negative characterization that is protracted in the theophanic recognition type-scene"; O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, 218.

55 Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 141.

56 *Antiquities* 5.277–279.

57 Reinhartz, *"Why Ask My Name?"*, 98–99.

58 Younger, *Judges and Ruth*.

concern to anyone."[59] Whereas, her location in the field can convey her as a lonely social outcast, others treat the "field" as a positive metonymy for "the woman's independence."[60] A woman's location in the field however does not necessarily have to imply social rejection or marital liberation may simply be an indication that she was working in the field. While the notice of her "sitting" may suggest that she was idle, it could also be that she was engaged in some agricultural activity.[61] Mrs Manoah runs to alert her husband while the angel waits.

The clauses "Manoah arose and followed his wife" (Judg 13:11) depict Manoah as a passive man. However, he does not stay this way for long since when he sees the angel his incessant questioning begins (Judg 13:11–17). It has been assumed that the angel wants to speak only to Mrs Manoah and that Manoah's questions and invitations characterise him as intruding on a private encounter or conversation.[62] However, it seems difficult to support such a conclusion since the angel only appears a second time precisely because of Manoah's request.

The second theophany contains several key questions and partial answers. Desiring to confirm the identity of the stranger, the first question that Manoah asks the angel is "are you the man who spoke to the woman?" The angel replies, "I am." Manoah believes that the prophecy will be fulfilled but is still more inquisitive than his wife. He asks a second question to the angel, "now when your words come to pass, what shall be the boy's (מִשְׁפָּט) mode of life and his vocation?" Klein suggests another way to translate this, "how will the boy be judged (judgement of the boy) and how will his work be judged?"[63] Apparently Mrs Manoah's earlier report about the boy being a nazirite until death was not clear enough for the father-to-be. It is because Manoah's wife omits the last

59 Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 140.

60 Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 156.

61 Meyers notes that the majority of women's waking hours would have been spent in food processing (mostly sorting and grinding grain) and textile production and "supra-household" activities. The assumption that women stayed indoors in the "domestic sphere," while men spent all their time outdoors is more a modern-Western imposition that is foreign to the agricultural/pastoral nature of the ancient Palestine; Meyers, "Archaeology—a Window to the Lives of Israelite Women," 100–01. Thus, the weight of interpretation cannot simply be placed on whether a woman is in a tent (Gen 18) or whether she is in an open field (Judg 13). The whole narrative's plot, not just the setting, must determine whether or not a woman is subjugated or liberated.

62 "Unable to grasp that the angel seeks an audience with his wife alone, he rambles on, extending inappropriate invitations (Judg. 13:15) and asking unanswerable questions (13:17)"; Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 164.

63 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 124.

piece of information that the angel gave, "he will begin to deliver Israel from the hands of the Philistines" (Judg 13:5). Curiously, the angel[64] replies Manoah's question without answering it "let the woman pay attention to all that I said. She should not eat anything that comes from the vine nor drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean thing; let her observe all that I commanded" (Judg 13:13–14). Manoah's question is not fully answered because there is nothing further said about the vocation of the son.

Manoah's fatherly concern is expressed in his question "how will the boy be judged (judgement of the boy) and how will his work be judged?" (Judg 13:12).[65] Such a question is very typical of Akan parents, who believe that it is their duty to shape the child's vocation and future. In Akan while it is the Mother's role to nurture it is seen as the Father's responsibility to ensure that his child is educated and equipped for a decent vocation.[66] "The automatic responsibility of training by the father is expressed in the proverb, "*Ɔbi nkyere Ɔtomfuo ba atono*, (No one teaches the blacksmith's child how to smith)."[67] Many times this means that Akan fathers persuade their children to take careers such as medicine and law or other disciplines that they favour.[68] Additionally, Block highlights a Ugaritic text (Ug. V 6.3–12) that parallels Manoah's question and may be helpful in understanding him as a character. "When he arrives at the lord of the great gods with a gift, he must ask for a decision [*mtpt*] about the child … And your messenger will arrive with a gift; he will receive a decision [*mtpt*]."[69] This text indicates the general ANE belief that the gods decided the destinies of children. In light of this, Manoah is not just a verbose character but also an eager expectant father who wants to know what YHWH has planned so that he can guide the child accordingly. This fatherly concern is expected and lauded among the Akans.

Apparently satisfied with the angel's last reply, Manoah proceeds to his third question, which is couched in a request, "please let us detain you so that we may prepare a young goat for you" (Judg 3:15). This display of hospitality was usual for a visitor but especially one who brings welcome news and is a messenger

64 Here in Judg 13:13 the title switches back from "angel of God" to "the angel of the Lord."

65 Klein's translation; Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 124.

66 "It is considered to be a father's duty to bring up and equip his children for life"; Fortes, "Time and Social Structure," 23.

67 Bartle, "The Universe Has Three Souls," 96.

68 At times this is done without much consultation with the son/daughter to consider how their interests or talents match up to the Father's desired career goal.

69 Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 408–09.

from God, whether divine or human Manoah does not yet know at this point. Fuchs negatively characterises Manoah's hospitality as "maladroitness."[70]

The angel makes it clear that he will not eat the food (Judg 13:16). If he had stopped his speech here then this outright refusal of a host's meal would have been tantamount to insult. However, the angel adds that the couple may offer the goat and grain as an acceptable offering to YHWH.[71] That the angel rejects Manoah's food is not necessarily a slight caused by his awkwardness. Rather it is part of the HB's divergence from the ANE mythic motif of worshippers offering food to the gods so as to quench their hunger and thirst. This divergence in the HB presents YHWH, whether in angelic form or not, as so self-sufficient that, while he requires perpetual offerings and sacrifices for "food,"[72] he does not actually need to eat the offerings presented to him (Ps 50).[73]

Undeterred, Manoah asks a fourth question, "what is your name, so that when your words come to pass we may honour you?"[74] This inquiry as to the name of a supernatural being is reminiscent of Jacob's plea "please tell me your name" (Gen 32:29). In this night-to-dawn encounter a supernatural man wrestles Jacob and is bested by him. The supernatural man asks Jacob "what is your name?" and subsequently renames him as Israel. However, when Jacob asks for the identity of the man his question is evaded with the response, "why is it that you ask my name?" (Gen 32:29). Jacob does not find a specific name but he realizes that he has encountered God and lived to tell the tale, so he names the place פְּנִיאֵל "the face of God" (Gen 32:30).

Similar to Jacob's experience (Gen 32:29), Manoah's inquiry about the visitor's identity is answered with another question, "Why do you ask my name, seeing it is wonderful (פֶּלִאי)?" (Judg 13:18). It has been suggested that the emissary's wish to be nameless is intentional in order to highlight the affinity that he has with Manoah's wife, who is also nameless.[75] It does not seem to indicate the angel's irritation or frustration with Manoah. The use of פֶּלִאי "wonderful" or "extraordinary" is significant since in Num 6:2 the verb יַפְלִא is used to describe the nature of the nazirite vow. The nazirite devotion, then, exemplifies

70 Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, 57.

71 The notice "for Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the Lord" (Judg 13:16) sets the stage for the surprise and fear that he will shortly experience.

72 Sacrifices and offerings are referred to as food for YHWH (Lev 3:11, 16; 21:6, 8, 17, 21, 22; 22:25; Num 28:2, 24; Ezek 44:7; Mal 1:7).

73 Wright, *Ritual in Narrative*, 92.

74 Block suggests that instead of the temporal clause "when your words come to pass," the context calls for a jussive rendering, "may your words soon come true!"; Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 408.

75 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 27.

something about the very name and nature of YHWH. The angel does not divulge his name to Manoah, but mysteriousness seems to be a common element of theophany in that "YHWH's nature does not allow him to be perceived beyond a limited sense."[76] Still, it is a little curious that Manoah does not, like Jacob, give the place a name, or, like Hagar, give his own name to the angel. While he declines to disclose his name, the angel hints at his divine nature with the self-description פֶּלְאִי wonderful or incomprehensible (Judg 13:18).[77] Manoah's offering of a young goat[78] and grain offering to YHWH, receives acceptance by way of a wondrous spectacle (Judg 13:19). The phrase וּמַפְלִא לַעֲשׂוֹת is difficult,[79] it could be translated "working wondrously in deeds," and may suggest that there are other miraculous elements accompanying the angel's ascension in the sacrificial flame. Whatever the case, it is at this juncture that the couple falls prostrate to the ground.

Manoah now knows that it was the angel of YHWH (Judg 13:21). It is this awareness that means there is no need for the angel to reappear to Manoah, or his wife, again (Judg 13:21). The couple both have been given enough knowledge and insight as to their task of parenthood. Yet, Manoah is now in fear

76 Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 22. Also, Webb adds that the namelessness or mystery surrounding the angel is functional and conveys the idea that divinity is neither predictable or controlled by offerings and rituals; Webb, *The Book of Judges*, 174.

77 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 29.

78 Goats could be presented as burnt offerings (Lev 1:10–13), peace offerings (Lev 3:12–17) or a leader's sin offering (Lev 4:22–26), but there is no specification that it had to be a kid goat. Thus the specific phrase used here in Judg 13:19, אֶת־גְּדִי הָעִזִּים "the kid of the she-goats" may indicate a more precious offering than an adult goat. These kid goats seem to appear in contexts where special effort or offering is being made—Rebekah tells Jacob to get two of these so that she can prepare a dish for Isaac (Gen 27:9); Jacob then uses this hair to put on his neck and hands (Gen 27:16); Judah wants to give this to Tamar as payment (Gen 38:17); Gideon prepares this for an offering to the angel (Judg 6:19); Samson goes to see his wife and brings her one of these (Judg 15:1); and Jesse sends David one of these along with bread and wine to give to King Saul (1 Sam 16:20).

79 This hiphil absolute participle occurs only once so it is difficult to know how to translate, especially because it is followed by Qal infinitive construct. What sense does this verbal construction give? In 2 Chr 26:15 the hiphil perfect is followed by a niphal infinitive construct with lamedh prefix כִּי־הִפָּלִיא לְהֵעָזֵר "for he was marvelously helped." Japhet notes the use of עזר "to help" is a "Chronistic idiom" repeated several times because it is "the root of Uzziah's name in it's Deuteronomistic form"; Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, 877, 83. However, Japhet makes no comment on the use of הִפְלִיא in connection the idiom. I suggest that the verb פלא both in Judg 13:9 and 2 Chr 26:15 give a sense of a miraculous or divine deed. Additionally, in Judg 13:9 it functions to put the plot in slow motion so as to appreciate the miracle(s) being performed by the angel.

for his life. Both he and his wife realise the identity of the angel only after he ascends in the sacrificial flame.[80] The angel was formerly thought to be a "man of God" (Judg 13:6), a common designation for prophets.[81] Manoah had prayed for a reappearance of the "man of God" but instead the narrator notes that "the angel of God" comes (Judg 13:9). Interestingly, the alternation between the designations given to the angelic being is intentional, it is meant to convey the couple's "struggle to recognize the 'man's' true identity."[82] For "the angel of YHWH" does not seem to be just an emissary but a unique angel equated with YHWH himself (Judg 13:22).[83]

Mrs Manoah's retort to her husband is confident, "If YHWH desired to kill us he would not have accepted a burnt offering and grain offering from our hands, nor would he had shown us all these things, nor would he have let us hear things like this at this time" (Judg 13:23). While her response (why would God accept our offerings only to kill us?) appears logical, hers is not necessarily a common assumption. Manoah is chided by interpreters for his "unnecessary fear"[84] at the realisation of the angel's identity, but such fear appears to be a usual human response to theophany.[85] Thus, the confidence that Manoah's wife has is not to be used to conclude that Manoah is inept, for his fear is an appropriate response.[86] Additionally, Manoah's fear "serves as a foil for Samson's lack of it: the latter treats his god like a powerful buddy rather than an awesome divinity. In fact, Samson takes his consecration to Yahweh as if it were the opposite: Yahweh's consecration to him."[87] Although Manoah's wife is more

80 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 28.

81 Deut 33:1; 1 Sam 2:27; 9:6; 2 Chr 8:14; 1 Kgs 17:1 etc.

82 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 28.

83 See also, Gen 16:7–13; 22:11–18; Exod 3:2–4; Num 22:22–35; Judg 2:1–5; 6:22–23.

84 Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 32.

85 Still, Savran proposes cowardice on Manoah's part when he adds that other biblical characters are in fear for their lives because in their situations there is actually "a real indication of danger"; Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 137. However, it is not danger that incites concern for one's mortality but it is the recognition that one has seen YHWH: Hagar wonders at being alive after theophany (Gen 16:13); Jacob thinks it important to underscore the fact that he is alive after seeing God (Gen 32:30); and Gideon is fearful because he has seen the angel of YHWH face to face and has to be reassured that he will not die (Judg 6:22–23).

86 "Manoah's response to the angel's departure, wholly natural, acknowledges finitude in the presence of infinity"; Crenshaw, *Samson*, 76.

87 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 126. *Contra* Alter who believes that Manoah is not a foil of Samson but rather a kindred character. For Alter, Manoah's awkwardness, as evidenced by his questioning and illegitimate fear at the theophany, is

poised one wonders if she truly realises the gravity of the lifetime naziritehood that her son will have. Neither Manoah's or his wife's reactions to the theophany are necessarily negative, rather they seem to be different expressions determined by the amount of information they have been given.

Infertility Reversed

Manoah's awkwardness has been suspected by some as indicating a lack of virility; "in terms of characterization, the portrait of the bumbling Manoah makes it difficult to imagine him impregnating his wife."[88] If Manoah is not believed to be the father then who is? Havrelock thinks that the story indicates that the angel fathers Samson.[89] However, the suggestion that there was a "sexual transaction between the divine messenger and the wife of Manoah"[90] is not to be found within this narrative.[91] As Galpaz-Feller states "the phrase 'a man of God came unto me' (Jud. 13:6) has no sexual connotation."[92] That this is not a sexual scene is shown in the following. The other time that a woman uses this phrase בָּא אֵלַי (he came to me) to refer to sexual activity is when Potiphar's wife falsely accuses Joseph of raping her (Gen 39:14, 17). Elsewhere, the verb בּוֹא is conventionally used to denote sexual intercourse,[93] however it is not conventionally used of an angel of YHWH and a woman,[94] thus it is difficult to interpret such a situation here. That the narrator omits a statement such as "and Manoah knew his wife and she conceived," is likely an indication

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passed on to Samson by the fact that his "brawn" far outweighs his "brain," or the ability to make wise choices; Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 124.

88 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 175.

89 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 175.

90 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 114. Klein also adds that Sarah experiences the same with the three visitors.

91 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 114. *Contra* Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 22.

92 Rather, what is at work here is that at times "the disappearance of the men … permits the figures of women to occupy center stage"; Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 22.

93 For instance, Gen 16:2; 30:3; 38:8–9; Deut 22:13; Judg 15:1; 2 Sam 3:7; 12:24; 16:21. The other text that is often cited in favour of the previous position is Gen 6:4 where יָבֹאוּ בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים אֶל־בְּנוֹת הָאָדָם (the sons of God went in to the daughters of man) so that they gave birth to הַגִּבֹּרִים (the mighty men). However, in this context the sons of God are not superhuman beings but seem to be included in the humankind that YHWH later regrets creating (Gen 6:5–7). While men use this language, there is the instance of Lot's daughters who both go in to have sex with their father (Judg 19:30–38).

94 The narrator has divulged the "man of God's" real identity as the angel of YHWH (Judg 13:3), although at this point Manoah's wife is yet to find out.

of Manoah's secondary role in the narrative and not proof of doubt concerning his paternity.

The supposed clues[95] of the angel's paternity are all based on the assumption that there is a need to explain the origins of Samson's "super-human" strength. However, this line of interpretation follows ancient traditions such as interpreting the "sons of god" (Gen 6) as angels who procreate with human women to create the super-human *nephilim*. In regard to this the HB does not seem to promote the mythic motif of a hero being born of an earthly mother and fathered by a deity. This demythologization "assigns procreation to the father and, at the same time, emphasizes that the son is chosen and preferred by God."[96] In this narrative Manoah is on the periphery, not because of a paternity question, but because his nameless wife is the central human character.

The exact point at which Mrs Manoah conceives is unclear. The phrase in Judg 13:5 כִּי הִנָּךְ הָרָה וְיֹלַדְתְּ בֵּן "behold you are pregnant and you will bear a son," is also used by the angel of YHWH to Hagar (Gen 16:11). If this is translated the same way in Judg 13:5 then angel-paternity proponents could use this as evidence of divine impregnation.[97] However, there is another possible explanation. Manoah and his wife may have conceived between the first and second theophany. This could be the reason why the familiar notice "and she conceived" is missing, however, it is difficult to be exact on this point.

Finally, barrenness is reversed for Manoah's wife and she gives birth to a son. Interestingly the angel does not give a name for the son neither does the narrative "interpret the child's name as is usually done in the birth stories of other heroes."[98] Instead, Mrs Manoah is the one that names her son שִׁמְשׁוֹן Samson. Manoah has left something undone. He had previously said that he wanted to know the name of the angel so that he could honour him when the proph-

95 Havrelock has asserted that the following clues are evidence of Samson's divine paternity: the angel approaches Manoah's wife when she is on her own; nazirite status from the womb is an indicator of "divine paternity;" even though Manoah asks for another visit the angel intentionally appears again to the woman when she is on her own; the field is a place of romance and fertility as it is not governed by "social constraint;" apparently Mrs Manoah's report to her husband shows some sign that she feels guilty about something; the angel focuses on his conversation with Mrs Manoah; Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 174–75.

96 Amit, "'Manoah Promptly Followed His Wife' (Judges 13:11)," 155.

97 For instance, Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 112, 14. Also, Reinhartz, "Samson's Mother," 34–35.

98 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 31. Other miracle children have names with interpretation: Isaac (Gen 21:5–6), Jacob & Esau (Gen 25:25–26) and Samuel (1 Sam 1:20, 27–28).

ecy was fulfilled (Judg 13:17). Yet, when Samson is born and named there is no speech from Manoah, either commemorating the place where the prophecy was given or honouring the divine emissary.

The choice of Samson's name is curious; he is not given a theophoric name[99] or a name that is related to the circumstance of his conception or birth.[100] The meaning of שִׁמְשׁוֹן may be connected to a hero's legend within the sun cult, which may have been assimilated from Canaanite, Egyptian and Assyrian societies.[101] שִׁמְשׁוֹן derived from שֶׁמֶשׁ (sun) and with the diminutive suffix means "little sun" or "solar one."[102] This suffix *on* may also be a Ugaritic form ending for proper names,[103] or *on* may designate strength or sexual potency.[104] Mrs Manoah chooses a name that seems to have little link to the childless past or the divine visitation received.[105] There is no explicit connection between Samson's name and the prophecy concerning his life's vocation.

In Akan society a previously childless couple will always give a name that conveys this past challenge and commemorates the divine assistance. Names such as *Nyamekyɛ* (God's gift/a gift from God) or *Nhyira* (blessing) are common for children of previously childless couples. Children who were born to women who suffered repeated miscarriages, stillbirths or infant death would be called *Begyina mma* "come and stay children."[106] Such children would at times be given an odd name in addition to their other names and then be dedicated to a deity who was to watch over their soul.[107]

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99 It could be that the reference to the sun is as a deity. This is suggested by Crenshaw; Crenshaw, *Samson*, 15–16. In this case Crenshaw links Samson's hair as being evocative of the "sun's rays" and other actions as typical of solar myths.

100 Cases where reference is made to YHWH and his enabling of the conception: Isaac—he laughs (Gen 17:17, 19; 18:13; 21:6); Samuel—asked for (1 Sam 1:20); Joseph—he will add/may he add (Gen 30:24). A case in which the circumstance at birth determines the name is Esau (physical appearance) and Jacob (physical action of grabbing Esau's heel) in Gen 25:25–26.

101 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 31–36. Alter also believes the etymology of Samson's name to be "sun-power"; Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 124.

102 Crenshaw, *Samson*, 77.

103 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 37.

104 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 38.

105 Unless one takes "sun" to be figurative language for the joy they have received. However, usually the names given to the children of formerly barren wives are less figurative and more concrete.

106 Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 65.

107 Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 65.

Why is a miracle child not given a name that commemorates YHWH's intervention? Perhaps, this is an indication of the pervasive syncretism of the Judges period.[108] More to the point, the Samson narrative uses this disparity between name and vocation as an intentional foreshadowing of Samson's life; his life and his name never truly match up until his end. For the Akan, naming a child is a prophetic exercise and a means of guiding that child in the decisions that will shape her/his destiny. In choosing this name for her son the mother will soon realise that Samson does behave as if her were the centre and all the world revolved around him. Samson does not do justice to his miraculous birth or his calling as a nazirite.[109] However, when Samson meets Delilah his name becomes ironic for Delilah's name is probably derived from Hebrew לַיְלָה "night"[110] or perhaps even from דְּלָה "hair." Samson the "little sun" is bested by the "night."[111]

The notice "the child grew up and the Lord blessed him" (Judg 13:24) is found, with some variation, in the narratives of some special children.[112] The angel of the Lord, YHWH personified in angelic form, had prophesied Samson's life, but now it is "the Spirit of the Lord" that will begin to disturb or drive him toward his vocation (Judg 13:25). Samson's start in life is blessed and spirit-driven and spirit-disturbed.

Samson's introduction to the world is preceded by description of two parents who see and hear "wonders" but perhaps may not fully appreciate the gravity of what it means that Samson will be a nazirite for life. Galpaz-Feller believes that Manoah's household, before the birth of Samson, is a dysfunctional one in which the husband is wary of his wife and where the wife's "manipulative way she deals with him will be the model into which the boy Samson will be born and raised."[113] Samson appears to be the most advantaged of the judges, most of whom have a stated social disadvantage,[114] since he comes from a

108 Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 14, 48.

109 Bartusch, using redaction criticism, argues that Judg 13–16 was originally a story about a Danite hero who gained supernatural power from his hair not about a nazirite. He argues that the Nazirite vow was something instituted after the monarchy and that later redactors imposed this nazirite element onto Samson in order to transform the folk myth of the Danite hero; Bartusch, *Understanding Dan*, 161–63.

110 Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 222.

111 Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 222. Also, Schneider, *Judges*, 224.

112 Ishmael (Gen 39:2); Samuel (1 Sam 2:26; 3:19); John the Baptist (Luke 1:80) and Jesus (Luke 2:40, 52).

113 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 23.

114 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 115. The social advantages mentioned: Ehud is left-handed, literally "bound in his right hand" (Judg 3:15), Deborah is the only

two-parent home, his parents seem sincere and his life is initiated by YHWH's will.[115] Ironically, however, it will be seen that Samson, the only judge from Dan[116] and the most advantaged, who will struggle with his internal weakness throughout his lifetime.

Conclusion to the Narrative of Manoah's Wife

As the narrative of Judges progresses there is a lack of seeking YHWH and this perpetuates a vicious cycle of sin and repentance. Furthermore, it is at the point of Manoah's and his wife's introduction that the cycle is shortened and breaks down.[117] Manoah and his wife, being a product of their period, may have also lost the will to seek from YHWH. Thus, while Manoah's wife's narrative is different from the other narratives in the barrenness tradition, it is at home in the context of Judges.

Barrenness places the continuation of the covenant in crisis mode,[118] yet it is also an opportunity for a deeper encounter, and relationship, between a woman and YHWH.[119] YHWH takes the initiative of appearing to Manoah's wife without any indication of protest on her part. Desperate times call for desperate measures; it is for this reason that YHWH takes the extreme action of calling a judge to be a nazirite from the womb. This story typifies the absolute claim that YHWH can make on an unborn child. It is significant that the last of the judges[120] is placed within the barrenness tradition. The significance lies in the fact that of all the judges, Samson's life was initiated by a miracle. The irony is apparent; Samson was to be a special judge of all the others. This, however, does not happen.

This narrative offers a twist in the barrenness tradition in a few ways. First, neither Manoah nor his wife protest or seek to change their infertility at the

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female judge (Judg 4:4), Gideon is the least of the least (Judg 6:15), Jephthah is the son of a harlot (Judg 11:1).

115 Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges*, 115.

116 Dan meaning "to judge."

117 As seen in Judg 16:1, there is no cry for deliverance from the Philistine oppression.

118 Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 159.

119 The infertility narratives do not indicate that women had no relationship with YHWH prior to a theophany but rather it marks a deeper level of relational knowledge. *Contra*, Havrelock who proposes that barrenness "highlights the absence of relationship between a particular woman and God"; Havrelock, "The Myth of Birthing the Hero," 159.

120 Samson being the last judge within the book of Judges, not counting the prophet Samuel who is also considered a Judge of Israel (1 Sam 7:6, 15–17).

onset of the narrative.[121] Second, Manoah's wife does not receive the intermediation of a husband or a human religious figure neither does she visit a sanctuary site. Third, the other "twist" in the barrenness tradition is represented by Samson's twisted locks; the physical manifestation of his nazirite devotion. These seven twists[122] of hair are significant feature within Samson's narrative since, depending on whether they are grown or shorn, they are indicative of the presence or departure of YHWH (Judg 13:5; 16:19–22). Fourth, Mrs Manoah is the only woman who is given strict pregnancy prescriptions because of her child's nazirite vocation. Fifth, the naming of Samson represents another deviation with the barrenness tradition. Samson does not receive a theophoric name or a name that is related to the circumstance of his conception or birth. In fact, his name echoes the self-serving activities that characterise most of his life and amplifies the irony when he meets his match in Delilah, Lady "night."

The narrative of Manoah's wife challenges our thesis that all women went to great lengths in order to become wom(b)en; that is to become mothers. In this story Manoah's wife curiously does not take any desperate measures. As noted earlier in traditional cultures infertility is a community concern not only a personal one. In the story of Manoah and his wife there is no indication that they or anyone else protest their childlessness. This narrative serves a significant function in subverting traditional cultural expectations concerning women's fertility, both within the Hebrew barrenness tradition and in traditional cultures today.

Hannah's Narrative

Many grand stories contain an obstacle that must be overcome. The greater the obstacle, the greater the coming hero needed to surmount it. It is no wonder that the books of Samuel open with the difficult impediment of infertility. One of Israel's formidable and formative figures will come by way of a woman who struggles with infertility. A study of the Hannah narrative (1 Sam 1–2) reveals the gravity of childlessness in the ANE context.[123]

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121 We will see a variation of this in the Shunammite's narrative as well. However, so far in the barrenness tradition Manoah's wife is the first to display this divergence.

122 The word מַחְלְפוֹת only found within Samson's narrative (Judg 16:13, 19) and is likely derived from חָלַף (to pass by or through) so that there is a sense that these locks are created from passing strands by or around each other. This is why I use the term twist.

123 "All the annunciation stories must be understood in light of the prevalent ANE view that a woman's one great avenue to fulfilment in life was through the bearing of sons"; Burgh, "1–2 Samuel," 124.

In an analysis of Hannah's story there are a combination of elements that underscore the centrality of wom(b)anhood in ancient and contemporary traditional cultures. First, the dynamic between co-wives in non-sororal polygyny are largely determined by who bears the most heirs for the patrilineage. Second, the husband and wife relationship is also important to assess since parties involved, while all products of the same cultural milieu, often have different priorities. Third, the role of divine revelation and cultic consultation play dominant roles in the HB barrenness tradition as well as in traditional cultures in today's world. Fourth, the barrenness tradition almost always prefigures the coming of a special child who will play a prominent role in the lineage and/or larger national history. Fifth, Hannah's narrative highlights the role of honour and shame in the context of infertility, this role is often thought about differently in non-traditional cultures. Finally, the examination of Hannah's story will emphasise that in the ancient world, and even today in traditional cultures, childbirth is *the* coveted rite of passage for women.

The Relationship Between Co-wives

Hannah is married to Elkanah, a man from Ephraim (1 Sam 1:1). Is Elkanah an Ephraimite or a Levite? First Chronicles 6:27–28 places Elkanah within the genealogy of Levi, thus it has traditionally been assumed that Elkanah is a Levite whose family had long resided in the territory of Ephraim.[124] This Levitical heritage explains why later, the miracle child Samuel is permitted, as young as he is, to wear a linen ephod and minister before YHWH in the sanctuary at Shiloh (1 Sam 2:18). It would be puzzling that a young non-Levite boy would be assigned Levitical duties and be allowed to wear such a garment if he were not from the tribe of Levi.[125]

First Samuel 1 does not explicitly state which of the two women Elkanah marries first; Hannah or Peninnah.[126] Both women are introduced in the same instance (1 Sam 1:2). In the scenario where Hannah is the first wife Elkanah

124 Elkanah is not the only Levite to be closely identified with another place; elsewhere a Levite from Bethlehem is paid by Micah to stay and be a priest in his house (Judg 17:7–13).

125 For the alternate view that Chronicles ascribes Samuel with Levitical lineage due to the Chronicler's priestly agenda which cannot condone the fact that Samuel is a non-Levite allowed to carry out cultic duties see Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles*, 151–53. In the same vein, but with a slight nuance, Japhet asserts that Samuel is given Levitical heritage because of a "contemporary need," namely the legitimisation of Heman who is introduced as Samuel's grandson; Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, 156.

126 Bergen proposes that "the order in which the wives are named suggests that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife"; Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 64.

marries again due to Hannah's inability to bear children. The scenario of Hannah as first wife is often bolstered by the traditional assumption that a devout Levite man (1 Sam 1:3) would only contract a second marriage in the dire instance of the first wife's infertility. However, this idea is neither explicitly validated nor denied in the narrative. Additionally, others suggest that seniority is also determined by the fact that Hannah's name appears before Peninnah's.

While culturally acceptable, polygyny would not have been as prevalent as assumed by many modern readers since it usually required a level of economic resources that was not always available to the average ANE man. Elkanah may be a man of substantial economic means who marries again simply because he can. Or like his ancestor Jacob, Elkanah marries the first wife in fulfilment of familial obligation and the second wife for "love."[127]

On the other hand, it is possible that Peninnah is the senior wife. In this case, Peninnah has attained wom(b)anhood and also fulfilled familial and marital expectations by bearing children for Elkanah. If Peninnah believes that her fecundity has invalidated the need for Elkanah to marry a second wife, and yet he still does, then this may further explain the antagonism that Peninnah repeatedly directs at Hannah. Hannah may represent for Peninnah what Rachel represented for Leah, a constant reminder that your husband loves the co-wife more *in spite of* reproductive inability.

Some have argued that the scenario that Peninnah is the first wife is less likely[128] since some wonder why Elkanah, a Levite, would contract a second marriage if his first wife were fertile.[129] Yet, the narrative seems to leave the possibility of both scenarios open to the reader. This interpretation of

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127 The juxtaposition that one wife is loved while the other is hated is apparent in the Leah and Rachel narrative. However, this does not necessarily suppose that all polygynous marriages, ancient and modern, have one wife who is loved intensely while the other is hated.

128 "It is not clear whether Elkanah takes his favoured wife Hannah after marrying the fertile Peninnah (as Jacob does), or whether he takes Peninnah having realized that Hannah is barren (as Abram does)"; Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, 153. Auld assumes it is more likely that Peninnah is the second wife; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 27. McCarter reads אַחַת in 1 Sam 1:2 as "first" not "one" since he writes, "the expected reading *ha'ahat* has some manuscript support and probably ought to be restored"; McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 51, 58.

129 Although priestly prescriptions against marrying a divorced woman or one previously engaged in fornication (Lev 21:7) do exist, the biblical text does not explicitly state that Levites should not marry more than one wife. Furthermore, the text seems to suggest that besides being a Levite by heritage Elkanah does not hold any cultic responsibility or function. In this sense, Elkanah is a "lay" Levite who shows his piety in annual pilgrimage and sacrifice at Shiloh.

Hannah's narrative will adopt the scenario of Hannah as the first wife only because this resonates with oral traditions concerning barrenness in the Akan context. Typically, the stereotypical character of a rival wife, who is younger and more fertile, complicates these narratives' plots. In such a reading, then, Hannah is the senior wife whose infertility is made more concrete as she gets older. Peninnah is cast as the younger woman who becomes a rival wife.

The stereotypical situation of two women at odds with a man at the centre is apparent in the biblical text. Hannah is the barren and possibly older wife, while Peninnah is the fertile and perhaps younger wife. It is not clear how many children Peninnah has, or what the gender distribution of the children is,[130] but Peninnah achieves wom(b)anhood thereby ensuring her place and security in her husband's household. Yet Peninnah appears to be without the special love and favour Elkanah has for Hannah. The mention of Peninnah as the צָרָה "rival wife" (1 Sam 1:6)[131] foreshadows the friction and provocation that will push Hannah to her breaking point (1 Sam 1:6–9). The situation between Peninnah and Hannah is reminiscent of that of Rachel and Leah (Gen 29–30), and to a lesser extent Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16).[132]

Peninnah's actions are intended to incite a reaction from Hannah. Since YHWH has "shut" Hannah's womb, Peninnah takes any occasion to provoke her bitterly (1 Sam 1:6).[133] What we see, then, is a difference in character of these women. While Peninnah does not have any direct speech in the narrative, her actions have full impact and force. In contrast, Hannah starts off as a more passive character. Although it is soon clear that she is the protagonist and heroine of the story. Peninnah is characterised not only as one who does not have respect for the first wife of the house but also as one who does not respect the holiness of the place nor occasion in which they all find themselves. Each year during their pilgrimage in Shiloh, the state of affairs between the wives escalates to the point that Hannah weeps continually and refuses to eat (1 Sam 1:7).

In addition to her experience of childlessness Hannah has the burden of a negative relationship with her co-wife, Peninnah. Peninnah's treatment of

130 Peninnah has "sons and daughters" (1 Sam 1:5) but we do not know if she has more sons than daughters or vice versa.

131 Leviticus 18:18 forbids a man to marry his wife's sister thereby לְצָרֹר making her a rival. It seems that צָרַר is a denominative verb from צָרָה.

132 Hagar is not a wife but a concubine and she does not stay in Abraham's household like the other wives mentioned above.

133 The Hebrew phrase וְכִעֲסַתָּה צָרָתָהּ גַּם־כַּעַס בַּעֲבוּר הַרְּעִמָהּ is certainly stronger in its tone than rendered in most English translations. A possible translation may be, "And her rival would provoke her (even to the point of) to anger in order that she (Hannah) would thunder (with anger)."

Hannah would simply not be allowed in Akan culture. Although she has had children, and in this way brought honour to her husband, Peninnah has no right to disparage Hannah because she is the first wife. Additionally, in Akan polygynous marriages such bitter exchange between wives is prevented for the most part since in former times women would live in their own homes and the husband would live elsewhere. When a couple had children the child would stay within his mother's house while his father lived somewhere else in the town.[134] During the evening time children would be sent on an errand to deliver cooked food to their father's homes because each home had their own food supply and income.[135] This is why Akan prefer endogamous marriages because "if they live in the same village, they continue to reside with their respective matrilineal kin without detriment to their marital relationship. It is quite common for them not to have a household of their own."[136] In traditional society, the chance of the wives being in the same proximity was kept to a minimum to prevent such scenarios.

The Husband—Wife Relationship

Hannah's barrenness continues for an unspecified amount of time "year after year" (1 Sam 1:7). Yet in spite of her childlessness, Elkanah continues to give Hannah a quality portion of the offering.[137] The reasons for Elkanah's quality gift to Hannah are made explicit; he loves her and YHWH has closed her womb (1 Sam 1:5).

The husband's concern at the sight of his distressed wife is evident in the four questions he asks. Here Elkanah's portrayal is far from the stereotype of patriarchy, an autocratic and emotionally distant husband, but rather one who cares for the wellbeing and happiness of his wife.[138] First, he asks, "why do you weep?" Second, "why do you not eat?" Third, "why is your heart grieved?" Finally, "am I not better to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam 1:8).

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134 Fortes, "Time and Social Structure," 10–11.

135 Fortes, "Time and Social Structure," 10–11.

136 Fortes, "Time and Social Structure," 140.

137 The phrase מָנָה אַחַת אַפָּיִם is difficult. It could be "a portion of a face" or as Tsumura details it אַפָּיִם could instead be translated very literally in its dual sense "two noses." In this case Hannah received "two of the choicest parts of sheep, that is, two noses 'as one share'" or that the "two noses in our text stand for two heads of sheep"; Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 113–14. Probably, the focus here is not on the quantity of portion that Hannah received but rather on its quality; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 12–13.

138 *Contra* Murphy, "Elkanah becomes the stereotypical smug husband who believes that he is all the world to his wife"; Murphy, *1 Samuel*, 7.

The questions reveal a husband's compassion for his wife but simultaneously show his bafflement, and perhaps frustration, at how deeply she grieves in her childless experience.[139] Some have also suggested that Elkanah does not only wish to communicate his love for Hannah but that he also wants affirmation for he "is not at all sure of his excellence, and in his heart wants to be told by her that he is her darling little boy."[140] Elkanah wants to be a husband who is sufficient, and even more valuable than children, for Hannah. That he compares himself to ten sons does not necessarily convey low self-esteem but may be the opposite: he may desire Hannah to see him with the high estimation with which he sees himself. Or he desires for Hannah to see him as a good substitute for the happiness she would otherwise receive in motherhood. However, Elkanah fails to understand the importance of Hannah's turmoil. She is pining not only for a child but also for the honour, economic security and fulfilment that motherhood held even after the death of a husband.

Hannah meets Elkanah's queries with silence.[141] All his questions only skim the surface; they address the outward manifestation of her inward grief. Hannah's silence was as much of an answer to her husband as a verbal response could give.[142] The reader infers that what happens subsequently spells out that Hannah's answer to the last question is a clear and resounding "no!" "No, Elkanah you are not better to me than ten sons." For Hannah, and for the other childless wives, the love of a spouse cannot substitute the desire for a child. This is because children were not only there to give and receive love from parents but were also the means by which women attained economic security and honour even after their husbands' deaths. Elkanah's first wife waits until the feast is over and then makes her way to the sanctuary; she has a petition to make (1 Sam 1:9).

The silent response that Hannah gives to Elkanah resonates in an Akan perspective. Elkanah's speech is indicative of the lack of comprehension that men in traditional societies may sometimes have in regards to the complete implications of women's socialisation. Any Akan woman will likely say "no,

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139 Alter, *The David Story*, 4.

140 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 30.

141 Bodner humorously states "Other commentators, perchance all too familiar with life in a post-Eden world, hear the words of a husband who really does not understand the frustration of his weeping wife. Offering food is one solution; asking a series of 'why' questions represents a different approach … Hannah is not recorded as responding to her husband Elkanah here, and some readers will not wonder why"; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 16.

142 Significantly, "when she herself finally speaks, it will be first to God"; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 105.

no you cannot be more to me than ten sons because if I don't have children *ma se ashe*."[143] In a traditional Akan perspective Elkanah's question to Hannah, "am I not better to you than ten sons?" (1 Sam 1:8), is interesting because an Akan woman who had ten children was honoured in a very special way. She would not have to take part in communal labour and she was given gifts by the palace to honour her as the epitome of wom(b)anhood.[144] So a traditional Akan reading of Elkanah's words, while appreciating his quest to understand his wife's anguish, would unequivocally conclude that a husband cannot replace the honour of ten children. Ten children would be an honour and prize not to be exchanged with anything.

While we may not make definitive conclusions about Elkanah and Hannah's relationship, what is observable is that the relationship does not depend on the presence of children—at least from Elkanah's perspective. Hannah's narrative is the only one within the infertility narratives in which the husband speaks so many words to his wife concerning infertility. Elkanah's questions portray him as one who wants to understand and yet is unable to fully comprehend the depth of Hannah's experience.

However oblivious Elkanah is to Hannah's plight it seems from the narrative, and from an Akan traditional perspective, that he is at least willing to engage her as to her experience. Even Jacob who loves Rachel above Leah is not recorded to have given her any gifts. Additionally, Jacob is not even characterised as a man even willing to ask questions pertaining to his wife's infertility experience. Jacob is rather angered and snaps "am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (Gen 30:2). Elkanah appears to be an engaging husband. He may not understand Hannah but he is willing to ask some questions at the very least. This is a unique case within the HB barrenness tradition. Traditionally, in Akan society a husband could divorce his wife if she was a *ɔbaabonin* "a barren woman," but not for other reasons such as adultery. This practise stemmed from the belief that the purpose of marriage was to perpetuate the family (specifically the matrilineage). Thus, if a husband chose to remain married to a childless wife it was usually seen as a sign of great attachment. Furthermore, if such a husband were to continually lavish special gifts upon his childless wife, to the exclusion of the fertile second wife, this would be seen as evidence of extraordinary affection.

143 "*Ma se ashe*" literally means "my loins are burned" but is used to denote women who cannot have children and subsequently their matrilineal descent line has been "burned" or cut off. This is phrase commonly used in the Twi language.

144 Cf. 3.5.2.

Divine Revelation

Key within the HB barren-wife narratives is the element of divine revelation, through theophany or human intermediaries. The divine revelation to the barren women suggests that while others may have viewed them as cursed or forsaken by God, YHWH had in fact not forgotten them. The three men, connected with YHWH, visit Abraham's tent and prophesy that "at this time next year" Sarah would have a son, Isaac (Gen 18:1–10). Years later, after twenty years of marriage Rebekah, Isaac's wife, will conceive her own miracle child. When she feels the twins struggling in her womb she inquires of YHWH and receives an oracle (Gen 25:22–23). Another instance of theophany occurs in the narrative of Mrs Manoah in which the Angel of YHWH appears twice. After Mrs Manoah and her husband offer a sacrifice and see the angelic being ascending in the flame they realise that they have seen YHWH himself (Judg 13:22–23). Additionally, The Great Woman of Shunem, like Hannah, receives divine revelation through a human intermediary. Elisha prophesied that the Shunammite woman would have a son within one year and it came to pass (2 Kgs 4:16–17). The HB barrenness tradition contains the theme of divine revelation, whether through theophany, oracle or visitation with YHWH's messengers/intermediaries.

In Hannah's story, Eli is the representative of God and thus stands in YHWH's stead.[145] When Hannah enters the sanctuary Eli the Priest is sitting on a seat by the doorpost (1 Sam 1:9).[146] That Hannah is found in the sanctuary and in close proximity to the Priest is significant.[147] Hannah is the only barren

145 Alter, *The David Story*, 4.

146 There is only one other time Eli is reported to be sitting down on a seat. This time he is older and blind as he sits not by the sanctuary but by the wayside awaiting news of the captured Ark. When he hears the bad news he falls backwards off his seat by the gate, breaks his neck and dies (1 Sam 4:13–18). Spatially, then, there is significance in the author's mention of Eli's seat. Eli's first seat is in the confines of the cult while his last seat is in the profane setting before he receives news of his profane son and the Ark that has been profaned by the Philistines. For Alter both scenes are "a token of his infirmity, his passivity or incapacity as a leader"; Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 260.

147 Peritz's 1898 article "Woman in the Ancient Hebrew Cult," points out that it was normal practice sanctioned by Deuteronomic law for women to be present in the sanctuary during feasts and festivals (Deut 12:12; 14:22–29; 15:19–23; 16:9–15); Peritz, "Woman in the Ancient Hebrew Cult," 122–23. Also, Bronner mentions the significance of Hannah's cultic location. Meyers comments that the scarcity of women in cultic roles and settings should not surprise the reader since these were primarily male institutions; Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, 31.

wife found praying directly to YHWH for a child at the sanctuary site.[148] This is a significant foreshadow of her future child's service at the sanctuary, Hannah is the only barren wife to initiate such a dedication.

Hannah is representative of an Akan woman who typically would have visited a shrine to remedy her childlessness.[149] Shiloh is comparable with other cultic sites in Ghana where people go to request divine intervention in order to have children. After receiving instructions, incantations and traditional medicine, the woman will go home with the assurance of fertility. Although it is not always required, when the woman gives birth she dedicates her child to the deity of the local shrine. Traditionally, if the child were a boy his hair would be locked and allowed to grow long. In other instances the child may simply be named after the deity of the local shrine. While it is uncommon for a child to be sent to live in the shrine indefinitely there are periods in which the child must go back to pay homage to the shrine throughout his/her life. The dedication to the shrine is based on the belief that children are gifts from God and that in these special circumstances they must be especially devoted to him.

Grief and the social shame of childlessness prompt Hannah to pray in this location with such fervour.[150] The description of Hannah's emotional state of being is the clearest description of emotion within the barrenness narratives. The love of Elkanah is not enough to quench her desire for children. Hannah hurts over the provocation from her rival wife, Peninnah (1 Sam 1:7, 16). She weeps and is too hurt to eat or drink at the sacrificial feast (1 Sam 1:7, 8, 10). Hannah's actions are akin to someone experiencing depression.[151] She prays with such intensity and emotion that she has the same outward disposition as a drunken woman (1 Sam 1:13).[152] Hannah's "severity of spirit" once again emphasises that in this culture no reprieve is possible for a childless

148 Bronner also notes this and writes, "This behaviour is unique to Hannah, as the earlier matriarchs did not personally turn to prayer as a way to overcome their barrenness. She proactively seeks a solution to her infertility"; Bronner, *Stories of Biblical Mothers*, 31.

149 Cf. 3.3.1 and 3.4.2.

150 Mulzac correctly emphasises that Hannah's grief is a physical manifestation of her emotional turmoil. I would further add that it is the social shame of childlessness that brings Hannah to breaking point, so to speak; Mulzac, "Hannah," 208.

151 Mulzac, "Hannah," 208.

152 When Eli chides Hannah for being drunk she humbly corrects him and states that she is not "a daughter of worthlessness" (1 Sam 1:16). The irony is clearly presented; Eli is quick to point out and rebuke the apparent worthlessness of this woman yet he cannot quickly correct his sons who are described as "sons of worthlessness" (1 Sam 2:12). Alter highlights another irony "the Nazarites also refrained from wine, which throws an ironic backlight on Eli's subsequent accusation that Hannah is drunk"; Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 243.

woman, even in the situation where the spouse has made no formal complaint (1 Sam 1:15).[153]

Hannah "was in bitterness of soul, she prayed to Yahweh and wept exceedingly" (1 Sam 1:10). The socialisation toward wom(b)anhood was so strong in the ANE, as it is in traditional Akan context, that it is understandable that a childless woman would emphasise be "bitter of the soul" (1 Sam 1:10). Hannah, although loved by Elkanah, longs to be a wom(b)an—a mother. She vows that if she receives "a seed of men," meaning a son from God, then she would give him to YHWH all the days of his life and no razor would cut his hair (1 Sam 1:11). Hannah takes the initiative to make the vow because she believes that it is God who gives children.

As mentioned earlier, Eli is the mediator of divine revelation in the Hannah narrative.[154] As the Priest he represents YHWH when he assures Hannah that her heart-felt petition will be granted (1 Sam 1:17). Eli's role as a human intermediary is significant for when he pronounces a blessing, YHWH gives the gift of fertility. In addition to Samuel, Hannah and Elkanah have three sons and two daughters (1 Sam 2:20–21). Thus, although YHWH never directly speaks to Hannah, nor does the Angel of YHWH visit her, Hannah can still be confident that what Eli has spoken is the will of God.

The irony of Eli's interaction with Hannah, however, is that this "'divine messenger,' unaware of the content of his annunciation, unwittingly sends the woman toward a blessing that will wrest the leadership from his family."[155] Apparently this change of leadership is needed because although Eli is a priest he cannot discern "the rumblings of Hannah's heart."[156] His lack of spiritual discernment is perhaps symptomatic of the narrative notice that "the word of Yahweh was rare in those days, visions were infrequent" (1 Sam 3:1). Eli is no longer able to tell genuine worship and outright drunkenness apart. "There are many things a priest should observe (*shamar*); Eli observes Hannah's mouth, but 'her voice was not heard.'"[157] It is the juxtaposition of Eli's spiritual

153 Although it may be argued that Elkanah's marriage to a second wife is a form of protest. Jobling adds tongue-in-cheek that perhaps Elkanah feared that Hannah "would cease to be attractive if she were worn out by childbearing"; (Jobling, *1 Samuel*, 132).

154 Alter sees Eli as a bumbling character that does not successfully fulfil his role as a man of God and divine intermediary. "The uncomprehending Eli is thus virtually a parody of the annunciating figure of the conventional type-scene"; Alter, *The David Story*, 5.

155 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 86.

156 Ackerman, "Who Can Stand before YHWH," 2.

157 Ackerman, "Who Can Stand before YHWH," 3.

blindness (1 Sam 1:12–14) and his prophetic benediction (1 Sam 1:17) that make his subsequent role in the miracle-child's life so interesting.[158]

The difference between Eli's role and an Akan traditional priest, however, is that the latter often investigates the cause of the barrenness through divination. At times the divination may reveal spiritual causes like curses that have been placed on the woman or on the woman's family as a generational curse. If no spiritual cause is detected then the traditional priest treats the woman with healing herbs in addition to prayers for divine aid. In the Hannah story, in contrast, Eli's priestly role is not prominent. Hannah does not primarily go to see the priest but to be in the presence of YHWH to whom she prays and bitterly weeps (1 Sam 1:10). It is only because of Eli's interruption that Hannah engages him. That Hannah comes to pray directly to YHWH and does not first seek the mediation of Eli is remarkable.

A Special Child

A reading of the barrenness narratives indicates that barrenness may be taken as a sign of the impending birth of a special child.[159] All of the barren women eventually have at least one child of their own. Children of formerly barren women typically grow up to become extraordinary individuals who contribute significantly to the history of Israel. It seems that YHWH finally gives recompense for the years of lingering lament.

The Nazirite vow[160] that Hannah made for the son she had not yet conceived is unique to the barren wives tradition. No other barren woman makes such a vow. Manoah's wife is given no choice in the matter since the Angel of the YHWH tells her that the son *will* be a Nazirite (Judg 13:7).[161] The similarities

158 Ironically, it is when Eli's physical sight begins to diminish that his discernment is emphasised with regard to showing the young Samuel that it is YHWH's voice he hears (1 Sam 3:2, 8–9).

159 Ackerman, "Who Can Stand before YHWH," 2.

160 The Septuagint adds καὶ οἶνον καὶ μέθυσμα οὐ πίεται "he will drink no wine" to the Hebrew's original "a razor shall never come on his head" (1 Sam 1:11). Thus, we can deduce that in the mind of the LXX translator(s) Samuel was clearly a Nazarite.

161 The similarities between these two women are important; both women are told, although to a differing degree, to abstain from fermented drink (1 Sam 1:14; Judg 13:4). Eli's command is temporary compared with the one given to Mrs Manoah, and has little to do with the consecration of a child because he does not yet know what is making Hannah behave in a "drunken" manner. Also, the mention of a razor not being used on their sons' hair (1 Sam 1:11; Judg 13:5) Hannah imposes the nazirite stipulation of unshorn hair on her son as part of her vow to YHWH, whereas Mrs Manoah is given this specific instruction by the angel of YHWH.

between Mrs Manoah's son and Hannah's son extend no further than the nazirite stipulations.[162] While Samson and Samuel are judges during the period where Israel is under Philistine rule they differ in that "Samuel is pious and Samson is mischievous, Samuel succeeds where Samson fails, and Samuel is the prototype of the true deliverer where Samson fails to be."[163] In contrast to his initiative in Mrs Manoah's life, it now seems that "rather than dictating the nature of Israel's leadership, God seems to be waiting for a human initiative to give shape to it."[164] The fact that Hannah vows her son as a Nazirite, and a perpetual servant at Shiloh, reveals her commitment to YHWH and her deep desire for a child.[165]

Not only does Hannah dedicate her son as a Nazirite but she also sends Samuel to stay in the temple with Eli indefinitely. By his indefinite stay at Shiloh Hannah lets Samuel know that his existence depended on YHWH. Perhaps it is Hannah's vow and dedication for a son she has not yet conceived that subsequently makes him such a significant figure in the history of Israel. Just as in Mrs Manoah's narrative, Hannah names her own child because there is no name given in the announcement (1 Sam 1:17), neither is there a prophecy about the future child's prominence.[166] The reason for the theophoric name, Samuel, is significant "because I asked him of Yahweh" (1 Sam 1:20).[167] Hannah has no doubt that YHWH is the giver of children. Hannah is in the company of

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162 Samuel has more in common with the New Testament's John the Baptist. Striking similarities connect Samuel and John the Baptist. An Angel tells Elizabeth that John the Baptist will be a Nazirite from the womb (Luke 1:15). Both men are from the tribe of Levi. In adulthood both Samuel and John the Baptist prepare the way for two Messiahs: David and Jesus. Samuel anoints David thus starting his kingly ministry in Israel. John baptizes Jesus thus mark the beginning of his earthly ministry. Additionally, Zechariah's jubilation about the "the horn of salvation" (Luke 1:69) is clearly an allusion to Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1, 10).

163 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 80.

164 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 48–49. Also, Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 12.

165 "Is this vow but a symbol of her utter desperation? Is even a baby for a short length of time better than no baby at all? Is the status of motherhood, rather than the child himself, really what is at stake? Does she believe that if God will 'open her womb' for the first child others are sure to follow?"; Fewell and Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise*, 138. A resounding "yes" to each of these questions again highlights the personal fulfilment and social prominence achieved at the birth of a child.

166 Gnuse, *The Dream Theophany of Samuel*, 180.

167 Numerous commentators have pointed out that *Sha'ul* means "asked" and not *Shmu'el*. However, Rabbi David Kimchi's (1160–1235) proposal that *Shmu'el* was a play with the Hebrew words *sha'ul* and *me'el* "asked of God" is plausible; Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 244.

biblical women who named their children.[168] A woman naming her child does not negate the patriarchy of the ANE. However, it does indicate that wives and mothers had significant influence and sway; after all the action of naming in the ANE context was a powerful responsibility.

Hannah's naming of Samuel is very similar to that of Akan women who want their children's names to express the struggle of childlessness and their consequent victory. The difference however being that in the Akan context it is the men who choose the name of the children.[169] Similar to the Hebrew culture the Akan believe that a name is prophetic; it will help shape the character of the child. Often children are named after a deceased or existing family member who has made a significant contribution in their lifetime. The theophoric name *Nyamekyɛ* (a gift is from God)[170] is usually given to a child whose mother struggled before being able to have children. Hence, names are deliberated over and chosen wisely for they help to shape destiny. Hannah's choice of name, testifying that she asked for a child from God, is significant. From an Akan perspective, children are also given additional names commemorating the local shrine that the formely childless mother visited.[171] In this case an Akan reader would believe that it is particularly fitting for Hannah to add a name like Shiloh or a derivative of its root שָׁלָה to her son.

Samuel's name does reflect his character as he grows; he is godly. Samuel stands in stark contrast to Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas. While the boy ministers to YHWH by serving at the holy site (1 Sam 2:11, 18; 3:1, 15), Hophni and Phinehas desecrate the cultic offerings by having sexual liaisons with the female servants (1 Sam 2:12–17, 22).

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168 Eve named Seth (Gen 4:25); Leah named several sons (Gen 29:31–35); Rachel names Joseph and Ben-Oni, who is then renamed by his Father as Benjamin (Gen 30:24; 35:18); Shua, Judah's Canaanite wife, named her last two sons Onan and Shelah (Gen 38:4–5); Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, or her midwife named her sons "Perez" and "Zerah" (Gen 38:29–30); Pharaoh's daughter named Moses (Exod 2:10); Hannah names Samuel (1 Sam 1:20); Eli's daughter-in-law named her son "Ichabod" before she dies (1 Sam 4:21); Naomi's friends name Ruth's son "Obed" (Ruth 4:17); a nameless woman named her son "Jabez" (1 Chr 4:9); Maacah, the wife of Machir, named her son "Peresh" (1 Chr 7:16); and Elizabeth pronounces the name "John" instead of the expected "Zechariah" (Luke 1:59–60).

169 "Among the Akan, for example, naming children is the prerogative of men because only men are deemed to have the capacity to be spiritual protectors"; Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 84.

170 "The immediacy of God in African affairs is also demonstrated through the God-related names we bear"; Oduyoye, "The African Experience of God," 497.

171 See Akan chapter, under section "Naming ceremony (*abadinto*)."

As young as he is, Samuel wears a linen ephod (1 Sam 2:18). This is not an insignificant notice; rather it emphasises the unique priestly-prophetic ministry that Samuel had from boyhood till death.[172] Additionally, the robe (*me'il*) which Hannah makes for him annually has a narrative function, for in the books of Samuel *me'il* is synonymous with royal and political authority.[173] The notice of a garment given by a beloved parent is also reminiscent of another barren wife's child, Joseph (Gen 37:3).[174] As Samuel's mother makes a new robe she is contributing to the development of his authority in both the religious and political sphere. His training apprenticeship under Eli brings further prestige and honour to Hannah.[175] Samuel is the first Levite chosen as a Judge and prophet by God.[176]

Hannah's Song (1 Sam 2:1–10)

The joyful mother composes a song that expresses the extreme contrast between her former and present state. She describes herself as one who has given birth to seven children (1 Sam 2:5). We know from the narrative, however, that Hannah had a total of six children including Samuel (1 Sam 2:21). Is the previously barren woman who has given birth to seven children a self-description or is Hannah talking about someone else? The "seven sons" is a conventional leitmotif within the ANE of which there are only few remnants in the HB (Jer 15:9; Ruth 4:15).[177] It is a poetic expression of perfection and as such Hannah uses this in self-description to describe her complete satisfaction in motherhood.[178]

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172 See, Tidwell who counters the commentators that maintain that Samuel's ephod was not a priestly garment but a sort of loincloth. Since "the context of 1 Sam. II 18–21 sets the figure of the youthful Samuel as a faithful minister of the sanctuary in contrast with the corrupt hose of Eli," there is no reason to discount the priestly nature of this garment; Tidwell, "Linen Ephod," 505. Additionally, Heller writes "Samuel's wearing of the linen ephod indicates his participation in the cult and most probably is meant to interpret his participation in a positive light"; Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 54.

173 Cf. 1 Sam 2:19; 18:4; 24:5, 12; 2 Sam 13:18.

174 Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 79.

175 *Contra* Steinberg who, while agreeing that Hannah gained socio-economic prominence and prestige through motherhood, puzzlingly concludes that Samuel is the victim of child abuse. Steinberg maintains that Hannah exploits and abandons Samuel; Steinberg, "1 Samuel 1," 6–7.

176 Miriam, Moses' sister, was of course a prophetess from the tribe of Levi (Exod 15:20). Aside from her prophetic song at the crossing of the Red Sea, there is no record of her religious activity.

177 Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 145.

178 Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 145.

Hannah's song in essence is about how God "'turns the tables' on all humanity—full and hungry, rich and poor, barren and productive, lowly and exalted—all are in constant flux."[179] Not only is Hannah's song about a childless woman who received the gift of birth but also its juxtaposition of "powerlessness" and "praise" somehow summarises the story of Israel.[180] Further, Hannah's psalm begins the larger narrative inclusio of Samuel, Saul and David, which is then bookended by David's psalm in 2 Sam 22.[181]

Hannah's narrative is esteemed and appropriated by many childless couples and those who minister to them. A popular Twi Christian song's lyrics are evidence of this affinity; "*Adea w'aye ama Sarah; adea w'aye ama Hannah; adea w'aye ama Elizabeth; afei na edu me so. Ewurade meda w'ase; Ewurade me yi wo aye; Ewurade me kamfo wo; Alleluia*."[182] This song is an instance of reception history and it exemplifies how traditional culture still holds great influence when interpreting Christian Scripture. The popularity and frequent usage of this song in liturgy reveals that many women in this context believe that God can do for them *exactly* what he did for the HB's formerly barren ancestresses. In contrast, Western applications of the barrenness narratives often draw out spiritual or theological principles of faith without necessarily committing to the idea that God reverses contemporary diagnoses of infertility. Many childless women in Akan society uphold these narratives as examples of how God can reverse barrenness for the contemporary person.

Hannah's song (1 Sam 2:1–10) is akin to the songs that one would hear at a naming ceremony for a child of a formerly barren woman. The joy and exultation described by Hannah can also be seen in previously childless Akan women who wear white cloth and jewellery gifted to them after their delivery. Even when there may be no enemy involved, Akan people often depict blessings as "triumphing over my enemies," and a similar theme can be seen in Hannah's song.

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179 Heller, *Power, Politics, and Prophecy*, 48.

180 Alter, *The David Story*, 9.

181 Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 29. Andersson agrees that Hannah's "song is an introduction to the narratives about Samuel, Saul, and David and that it presents a general theme of the books of Samuel … the theme is the vicissitudes of fortune; that God brings down and raises up"; Andersson, *Untamable Texts*, 27. Also, Bodner notes "Hannah's song also shares language with David's hymn in 2 Samuel 22, forming a theological inclusio for the entire scroll"; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 29.

182 Translation is: "What you did for Sarah; what you did for Hannah; what you did for Elizabeth; it is now my turn. Lord I thank you; Lord I praise you; Lord I honor you; Alleluia"; Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness'," 456.

There is another remarkable element of Hannah's song that is especially applicable to Akan culture. New mothers are ascribed with warrior status. This is concretely evidenced in a standard greeting said to a new mother "*yɛ ma wo afremu*" (we greet you as one who has delivered).[183] Additionally, when the new birth is being reported to others the phrase "*wa fa ne ho afa ne ba*" (she has delivered herself and her baby) is almost always used. Similarly, the phrase "*okor sa na w'aba fie dwodwo*, 'she has returned successfully from battle,' is very revealing of the mindset that childbirth involves a process akin to a physically tough fight."[184] For a time after birth women are pictured in the same terms as men, they are warriors "returned safely from the battle front. For women, coming face to face with one's own blood is itself an act of bravery."[185]

The Vow

In the Mesopotamian context women were usually the ones who made vows. At times the high cost of the vow led some women to go into prostitution, whether once or severally, in order to fulfil their promise, which was usually monetary.[186] Extreme poverty at times meant that even when worshippers wanted to give precious materials or resources they could not. Therefore, some had no other valuable possession to give but than to dedicate their children to a deity, often for the specific vocation of temple service.[187] In the HB, however, women are not the primary makers of vows. Thus, when a woman does make a vow we must see it as very significant. In the case of Hannah she did not promise money, although Elkanah probably could have afforded to give her a considerable amount, nor did she promise any other precious material- she vowed the most valuable gift that she could think of; this child that she was asking from YHWH. It is not poverty that drives her to dedicate her son to YHWH's tabernacle at Shiloh but rather her desire to give the best out of all her abundance.

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183 A concise English translation of this greeting is difficult since the sense is that in delivering herself of a child she has managed to overcome a grave, life-threatening, danger.

184 Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness'," 438.

185 Oduyoye, "Women and Ritual in Africa," 13. Also see chapter 3 (*In*)*Fertility in the Akan Culture*, section titled "Wom(b)anhood: *The* Rite of Passage" for further detail on women warriors and pregnancy and parturition.

186 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 100–01.

187 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 100–01. Although here Toorn is speaking of widows who would be dedicated to the deities at advanced ages, I believe that here we can see that in most cases it was those who were seen to be destitute that were dedicated to the service of the temple. So it is very telling of the character, and indeed utter desperation, of Hannah who is not poor but would rather dedicate her son to service in YHWH's temple than make a monetary promise.

In the ANE it was known that children were given to the service of the temple for their lifetime. One text from Nineveh (640 BCE) details four brothers taking their sister's son to live in the temple of Ninurta and they vow not to revoke this ever.[188] In another contemporaneous text a man commits his sister's two sons to a life of service to the deity Nebo.[189] Among the Hittites, people with fertility problems vowed that if the gods gave them children they would return them by allowing them to serve in the cult.[190]

Since vows were thought to be a reliable way of persuading the gods to reverse one's infertility[191] they were taken very seriously by most. A Mesopotamian medical text documenting the case of an ill infant emphasises the importance of keeping one's vow. In this text the medical specialist's diagnosis is that the parents conceived this infant through the aid of a deity but they had failed to fulfil the vow they promised and as a result the gods were punishing them through the child's illness.[192] This kind of thinking was characteristic of the day and culture and would have been a discouragement to others who were tempted to make hasty vows only to be unfaithful to them when they received the answers to their supplications.

Through Eli's subsequent blessing, Hannah and her husband have three additional sons and two daughters (1 Sam 2:20–21). Eli's blessing was probably given not at one time but on separate occasions when Hannah would make new garments[193] for Samuel each year as he grew from infancy through childhood. While Eli gives the benediction, the narrative highlights that it is YHWH's visitation that actually enables Hannah to conceive and give birth multiple times (1 Sam 2:21). Eli is the messenger that delivers hope to the childless woman but later the narrative does not leave any ambiguity; Eli is only the conduit of YHWH's presence and power in this case. The nazirite stipulations mentioned in this narrative serve a purpose in the plot. Hannah wants her child to be in the priestly service; furthermore, the extent of her desperation is shown in her addition of the nazirite stipulations.[194] If YHWH will just grant her this request

188 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 136.

189 Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 12.

190 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 48–49.

191 Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 48–49.

192 Toorn, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave*, 80.

193 This notice, as insignificant as it may seem, is hard evidence that while Hannah gives her son to the service of YHWH at Shiloh she by no means intends to relinquish her motherly love or provision. The ephod is a reminder of his life's vocation but the robe is a reminder of his family ties and origin; Gnuse, *The Dream Theophany of Samuel*, 180.

194 This may be a "partial Naziritehood"; Ackerman, "Who Can Stand before YHWH," 3.

she will ensure that this child is doubly consecrated, as a priest and nazirite.[195] Samuel, however, becomes even more than she could have hoped for; he is not only a priest and a nazirite but also a prophet and a judge in Israel.

Conclusion to Hannah's Narrative

The term "wom(b)an" highlights the centrality of fertility and childbirth to the identity of women in the ANE and Akan contexts. This reality is verified through Hannah's emotional turmoil; the torment by her rival-wife; and the fact that even the love and generosity of Elkanah cannot satisfy Hannah's desire for a child.

Central to the Hannah story are the elements of shame and honour; birth is a rite of passage that brings about the reversal of shame into honour. YHWH's role as the womb-shutter is influenced by Hannah's desperate scene at Shiloh. Her extreme vow shows the depths of her desire as well as her spiritual devotion. Such a vow makes Hannah a unique figure within the barrenness tradition. Further, the fact that Hannah has five more children highlights her among the other biologically barren wives as she has the most biological children.

While the Hebrew descent system is patrilineal it is noteworthy that this does not negate the desire or urgency that Hannah had to have children. Just as Elkanah does not fully grasp the meaning(s) of Hannah's turmoil so it is that many do not fully realise the impact of childlessness for women in non-Western cultures, especially within a matrilineal descent system as in the Akan context.

The Great Woman of Shunem

The account of the Great Woman of Shunem (2 Kgs 4:8–17) is the last barrenness narrative within the Former Prophets.[196] This narrative differs from typical birth type-scenes[197] since it does not include the protest against childlessness.

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195 *Contra* Galpaz-Feller who argues that Samuel is not a nazirite like Samson and that this is a later assumption from Qumran and Josephus; Galpaz-Feller, *Samson the Hero and the Man*, 49.

196 Greater focus will be given to this portion of the Shunammite's story, however, brief mention will be made of the death and resurrection of the Shunammite's son (2 Kgs 4:18–37) as well as the reappearance of the Shunammite in 2 Kgs 8:1–6.

197 Typically the birth annunciation type scenes follow this pattern "plight-of-the-woman, prayer, annunciation scene proper, birth report, and concluding statement"; Finlay, *The*

The Great Woman of Shunem's narrative represents an aberration from the barrenness tradition. In addition to Mrs Manoah, the Shunammite woman's experience highlights the reality that cultural normativity does not eradicate peculiarity.

The Great Woman is an Israelite from the town of Shunem in the territory of Issachar (Josh 19:18; 2 Kgs 4:13). This woman does not have a personal name,[198] but is described as אִשָּׁה גְּדוֹלָה probably not only due to her wealth but also because she is highly respected in the community.[199] This is the only place in the HB where "great" is directly used to describe a woman.[200] She was perhaps wise and known for her generosity within the community. The epithet אִשָּׁה גְּדוֹלָה may suggest that her childlessness has not diminished her social status, or esteem, within the community. The Great Lady's social position seemingly surpasses that of the other barren women, except perhaps Sarah who is married to the very wealthy Abraham.[201] Interestingly, her husband is not described in these terms but remains somewhat of a silent character.

Can the social stigma of childlessness be mitigated if one has wealth or prominence? ANE texts concerning barrenness seem to suggest that even wealth could not prevent one from the affects of barrenness. This is seen in the fact that Kings, Queens and Scribes all displayed a profound dissatisfaction with their childless circumstance.[202] Additionally, evidence from the HB suggests that even wealthy couples such as Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and then Jacob and his wives were not exempt from penchant for fertility. It is true, however, that wealth perhaps increased one's options. A man of some economic means could contract additional marriages, however it seems that not

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Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible, 91. Shields elaborates further on the divergences: The Shunammite woman is not explicitly characterised as barren; Elisha is the only one involved and Yahweh seems to be absent from his decision-making; the woman apparently resists the prophet's pronouncement; the miracle child is not given a name as he will not have a significant role in the history of Israel and; the husband is virtually absent from the scene; Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 63.

198 Rabbinic tradition identifies her as the sister of Abishag (1 Kgs 1:3–4); Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 89.

199 Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 90.

200 Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 90.

201 Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 14.

202 See the chapter Fertility in the ancient Near East, section "The ANE Man and Infertility," for a list of Kings, Queens and Scribes who all sought different remedies for their childlessness.

all men wanted to pursue this option (Isaac, the Shunammite's husband and Manoah). In the case of the Shunammite woman, affluence could shield you from some of the shame and stigma associated with childlessness—perhaps.

Rather than being introduced on the narrative scene due to her infertility, The Great Lady of Shunem comes onto the story's stage because she offers hospitality to Elisha, the Prophet and Messenger of YHWH.[203] The language used of her initial meal invitation, תַּחֲזֶק, suggests that she had to *strongly* encourage or persuade Elisha to accept the hospitality (2 Kgs 4:8). Refusing hospitality could potentially cause great offence. Notwithstanding his initial hesitation, Elisha became a regular beneficiary of the Shunammite lady's generosity.

Further, recognising that Elisha was an itinerant prophet who often came to Shunem, the Great Lady increased her level of charity. She asked her husband to build an annex to the house with some furniture (bed, table, chair and lampstand). Elisha, in her estimation, is "a holy man of God" (2 Kgs 4:9) who is worthy of meals and comfortable lodging.[204] It is the Great Lady's suggestion, and direction, to her husband that ensures Elisha the nourishment and sanctuary that can be luxury items for an itinerant prophet. There is no speech or response from the husband, however he complies because on his next visit Elisha has somewhere to turn in for the night (2 Kgs 4:11).

The Shunammite woman is not only great in regards to resources but also in her generous reception and provision, which is befitting the culture. Further, we gather that this woman is a strong enough character to compel the man of God to accept her invitation, and to convince her husband to convince to commence and complete her extension and renovation plans.

Infertility Notice and Resolution

In wanting to repay the Shunammite's generosity Elisha asks what he can do for her (2 Kgs 4:13). The prophet suggests his political influence when he offers to speak to the King or Commander of the Army on her behalf. Strangely, Elisha summons the woman to stand before him but then does not speak directly to her. Instead the holy man speaks to Gehazi, his servant, who in turn repeats it to the woman. For someone who has frequented the house and been

203 An interesting contrast between the Shunammite woman and Sarah is apparent. Sarah has to be urged by her husband in order to offer hospitality to the divine visitors (Gen 18:6); the Shunammite, on the other hand, is the one that urges her husband.

204 *Contra* Bergen who holds the perspective that "her explicit description of Elisha's holiness follows rather than precedes her hospitality. It should not be read as the 'recognition' by the woman of the status normally accorded a prophet—this is the only place in Genesis–2 Kings where a prophet is referred to as 'holy'"; Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 92.

a regular recipient of the Shunammite's hospitality, Elisha acts in a "curiously indirect" manner.[205] As Alter puts it, if the Angel of YHWH can speak directly with Manoah's wife then why cannot Elisha, a mere human being, speak so with the Shunammite?[206] Imaginably Elisha may wish to keep a respectable boundary between them while he is about to encroach on a sensitive area of her life.

The hostess' response to the prophet's question is "I live among my own people" (2 Kgs 4:13). Rather than being seen negatively,[207] the response "is a polite refusal that suggests that she does not need the prophet's help."[208] Not only does her affluence and station mean that she doesn't need anything from Elisha but the response may also imply that "her motives for offering hospitality to the man of God are not self serving or directed toward a more utilitarian motive."[209] This woman has not only gone to great lengths for the prophet but has done it out of a deep respect because Elisha is a holy man.[210]

Not rewarding his generous host is not an option for Elisha. When the prophet presses the issue, Gehazi informs him that the woman has no son and that her husband is old (2 Kgs 4:14). It is not likely that the woman was standing in the prophet's chamber when Gehazi gives Elisha information of her childlessness.[211] Either she excuses herself or is dismissed because Gehazi once again calls her and she comes to stand in the doorway (2 Kgs 4:15). The Shunammite's position at the doorway is significant not only as a display of modesty in not wanting to enter the prophet's room proper,[212] but also as it evokes Sarah standing at the tent's entrance where she receives the prophecy of the coming child (Gen 18:10; 2 Kgs 4:15).[213]

Gehazi's announcement of the husband's old age is reminiscent of Sarah's emphasis of Abraham's age (Gen 18:12).[214] Further, the notice of the husband's age introduces some ambiguity as to the cause of the couple's barrenness.

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205 Long, *2 Kings*, 55.

206 Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 125–26.

207 For Sivan, Elisha's motive is a purely selfish one of not wanting to be outdone by the woman since "masculine perspectives of hospitality dictate forms of exchange which breed due reciprocity"; Sivan, *Between Woman, Man, and God*, 97.

208 Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 289.

209 Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings*, 77.

210 Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 289.

211 Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings*, 77.

212 Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 242.

213 Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 68.

214 Sarah's reference to Abraham's age in connection with her sexual pleasure seems to suggest some impotency as well as her own infertility (Gen 18:12). However, this seems unlikely since Abraham has fathered a child with Hagar.

Perhaps it is the husband's advanced age, not the wife's fertility, that is the cause of childlessness.[215] If the husband is sterile perhaps the Great Woman of Shunem has resigned herself to a lifetime of childlessness. Whereas husbands of barren women could contract a second marriage so as to have children, the extant ANE evidence does not indicate that women could marry an additional husband for the same reason. In such a scenario, perhaps the woman knew that her predicament was permanent and so had dismissed the possibility of children from her mind. This ambiguity is an interesting variance in the barrenness tradition in which the husband' fertility is typically not under any suspicion.

However, there is another possible reason for the notice of the husband's advanced age. The ambiguity may lead an Akan reader to wonder whether the husband, perhaps being much older than his wife, has been in a previous marriage that has produced heirs. In such a case the husband's lack of protest may put him in the company of Jacob and Elkanah, who having other children with other women do not see their unions with Rachel and Hannah, respectively, as needing to produce children at all costs. It is not unheard of for men, after divorcing their wives or being widowed, contract second marriages in which the wife is significantly younger than him. The younger wives may wish to have their own children but sometimes these marriages are contracted with the understanding that since the man has sired and reared his children then he does not wish to father anymore children with this new wife.

Another probable reason for Gehazi's mention of the husband's age is that if the Shunammite woman is barren, her husband's age compounds the issue of childlessness. Perhaps he will soon die and, therefore, without a son she will be susceptible to widowhood abuses. In a patrilineal system, unscrupulous in-laws may seek to confiscate the property and resources that a woman had especially when she had no children with her deceased husband. The woman's affluence and status may protect her but at the passing of her husband she will, without an heir for her husband, be very susceptible to social and economic abuses.

Elisha chooses the reward of a child. The holy man exceeds the standard annunciation formula. He paints the prophetic picture, "at this season next year you will embrace a son" (2 Kgs 4:16). Not only will barrenness be reversed and a miracle child be born but "Elisha hints at the Shunammite's future transformation into a fully realised mother."[216] The Great Woman of Shunem will become a wom(b)an. The man of God's pronouncement is akin to the prophetic

215 Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 62.

216 Long, *2 Kings*, 56.

proclamations concerning barrenness within Akan Christian congregations. One Pentecostal Charismatic church advertising their service promoted this line "come and break the bondage of barrenness and give birth next year'."[217] The certitude of the narrative notice that the woman had a son at the exact time Elisha predicted is what most childless couples envision for themselves.

Upon hearing Elisha's prophecy, however, the great Lady's response is "No, my lord, O man of God, do not lie to your maidservant" (2 Kgs 4:16). Some have proposed that the Shunammite's response was intentionally a rude response and not merely a statement of scepticism.[218] Or it could be that the Shunammite was not expressing scepticism but was feeling unworthy of the miracle because of her "pious humility".[219] Further, another interpretive trend upholds the woman's exclamation as evidence that she neither desired[220] nor actively sought to have a child.[221]

Is it possible that a woman in ancient Israel would not desire or actively seek a child? Frymer-Kensky takes the stance that the Shunammite woman owned her own land, was independent of her husband, and did not actively want a child.[222] This woman was like one of Zelophehad's daughters, she had married someone within her Father's clan so as to keep his inheritance and this is why she told Elisha "I live among my own people" (2 Kgs 4:13).[223] While this may be a possible explanation as to why the Shunammite woman owned land and perhaps enjoyed more independence than other wives, it does not necessarily follow that economic prosperity relieved her of fertility desire. Additionally, she would need a son, even sons, to help her tend and protect the land in her old age.[224] We may conjecture about the nature of her status as a "great woman"; however, the assumption that in a traditional culture a woman's wealth or prominence decreases her desire for children is difficult to sustain.

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217 Asamoah-Gyadu, "'Broken Calabashes and Covenants of Fruitfulness'," 439.

218 Long, *2 Kings*, 56.

219 Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 243.

220 Shields writes, "the woman does more than doubt: she actually resists the man of God's pronouncement"; Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 63. In this line of interpretation, perhaps the question later directed at Elisha "did I ask you for a son?" (2 Kgs 4:28) is evidence of the Shunammite's satisfaction with her prior childless state.

221 The same is also argued concerning Manoah's wife because there is no direct speech or actions indicating a desire for children. It is probable that motherhood as a central cultural expectation of women meant that the desire "goes without saying."

222 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 72.

223 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 66.

224 Having sons is of great socio-economic importance. Sons provided "economic survival" as well as "emotional sustenance" for women; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 90.

The Shunammite woman is not a typical woman from an Akan perspective. She is the one who should be approaching the holy man and asking him for a child but she does not. The mediation of traditional priests in Akan traditional religion is essential. They are thought to be able to mediate between the Supreme God, the *abasom* (lower gods) and the ancestors. Since they also see with spiritual eyes, they can often detect if the barrenness is a curse that has been placed on the woman by someone meaning her ill or whether it is a biological problem for which she needs herbs and spiritual assistance. That the Shunammite does not initiate the conversation about her childlessness when she has multiple occasions to do so is a puzzling element to an Akan reader. She had a holy man in her house and repeatedly did not mention any prayer or wish for a child in his presence.

There may be an alternative reason as to why the Shunammite woman neither acknowledges her childlessness nor expresses a desire for children. Perhaps, the issue is not her lack of desire but rather her fear of hoping in the prophecy. The Shunammite's words אַל־תְּכַזֵּב בְּשִׁפְחָתֶךָ are a protestation against "arousing false hopes"[225] and should be translated "do not arouse false hopes in your maidservant" (2 Kgs 4:16). Her exclamation is indicative of the previous times that her hopes have been dashed when she was not able to conceive and give birth. Thus, it is probable that this is a reflex reaction of someone who had "learned to live with her disappointment,"[226] rather than this exclamation being evidence of the Shunammite not wanting a child imposed on her.[227] While the great Lady does not verbalise a desire for a son her plea not to be aroused to false hope gives the reader the interpretive clue; "it is from the very intensity of her fear that we learn the intensity of her desire to hold a son in her arms."[228]

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225 "(As in Job 41:1—'any hope … must de disappointed [nikzevah]') or of 'doing something that cannot last' (as in Isa. 58:11—'you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail [lo yekazzevu]')"; Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, 243.

226 "It was this resigned acceptance of her destiny that was threatened by the prophet's announcement"; Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 19.

227 Shields sarcastically writes, "Anyone viewing this from a patriarchal perspective would never suspect that a childless woman's first wish might not be for a child"; Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 67.

228 Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 19. Later, when the Shunammite lady approaches Elisha after her son's death, she paraphrases her earlier speech using the phrase הֲלֹא לֹא תַשְׁלֶה אֹתִי אָמַרְתִּי "Did I not say, 'Do not mislead me?'" (2 Kgs 4:28). Here the use of תַּשְׁלֶה instead of תְּכַזֵּב (2 Kgs 4:16) suggests someone being caused to be at ease and carefree.

Despite her hesitancy to hope in the impossible, "the woman conceived and bore a son at that season the next year, as Elisha had said to her" (2 Kgs 4:17). The notice of conception and birth seems so abrupt that some have said it almost presents "the disinterested tone of a reporter."[229] The scene between Elisha and the Shunammite is evocative of the interaction between the three visitors and Abraham and Sarah. The two wives are both sceptical of the prophecy that is to be fulfilled "next year at this time" (Gen 18:14; 2 Kgs 4:16).

Hospitality

In the ANE, hospitality served to "transform a potentially hostile stranger into a guest."[230] Meals, in particular, were opportunities to create or renew relationships and alliances. Intriguingly, the ANE text that closely links infertility and hospitality does so with a man as initiator of hospitality. In the Aqhat epic it is Danil, not his wife, who goes to the sanctuary in order to feed the gods so that his prayers will be granted. As a recipient of the Shunammite's hospitality we understand that Elisha wanted to reward her. However, some scholars tend toward interpreting Elisha's reciprocity as a way to undercut the Shunammite's hospitality and outrank her again by gaining the upper hand.[231] The prophet experiences "an inner unease at the position in which he is placed."[232] Supposedly, the true motivation for helping the Shunammite is so Elisha can "play the power broker within a patron-client system, thereby putting the woman in his debt."[233]

Commentators who hold this view see the close connection between this episode and that of Abraham and Sarah and the three visitors/messengers. It is questionable, then, that commentators stop short of saying that the three messengers' reciprocity or prophecy to Abraham and Sarah is also an affront to their hospitality.[234] If the connection between the two narratives is similar then why is Elisha's desire to reward the woman's righteousness and hospitality interpreted negatively while the messengers' is not? Some imagine that there

229 Long, *2 Kings*, 56.

230 Hobbs, "Man, Woman, and Hospitality," 94. Using ethnographic data, Hobbs draws connections between traditional Mediterranean culture(s) and how this illumines the nature of ancient Near Eastern hospitality.

231 Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 66.

232 Hobbs, "Man, Woman, and Hospitality," 95.

233 Hobbs, "Man, Woman, and Hospitality," 95.

234 Hobbs, "Man, Woman, and Hospitality," 95. For instance, Hobbs sees "Elisha casting himself in the same mold as the messengers to the ancestor-couple" but he will not go as far as to say that in giving the prophecy the messengers were insulting their hospitality; Hobbs, "Man, Woman, and Hospitality," 95.

is a power struggle going on between the Shunammite and Elisha and that Elisha wants to clearly show the difference in status between him and the great woman of Shunem but that she "retains equal footing with the man of God."[235] The assumption that a prophet will have a power struggle with a woman who offers him hospitality is not germane to the narrative.

Reciprocity could potentially offend the honour of the host, however, "prophets transcend such consideration," hence the reason why "Elisha looks for some way to repay his hostess."[236] Perhaps, an "ordinary" man would not have dared attempt to reciprocate his host's hospitality but prophets, just like divine messengers, may not be bound by the same social restriction.

The husband's role in this story is minimal. That he remains in the narrative background does not necessarily suggest that he is weak. The husband's laid-back role is acceptable since hospitality is both the domain of women as well as men, and her assertive role is bringing honour to her husband.[237] It is precisely because "these strong actions of the woman are not done in opposition to those of her husband" that it is acceptable for him to be more of a flat character.[238] Hosting a man of God in one's house is seen as a sure way to invoke the blessings of God, not only on a personal level but also on a family and community level. In Akan culture, hospitality is seen as a role to be shared by the husband and his wife. Often, the labour is divided in that the husband provides financially so that the woman can prepare food and comfortable lodging for guests. If read in this way the Shunammite's husband is not a completely passive character who is upstaged by his wife.

Besides not desiring children some scholars assert that the Shunammite rejects Elisha's proclamation because she does not trust him as a man of God and is suspicious of his intentions.[239] For some Elisha's pronouncement upon the Shunammite is forceful and against her will, thereby making it akin to

235 Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 118.

236 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 65.

237 Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 65. Men's active participation in hospitality is seen in Abraham's narrative (Gen 18) and also in the story of the father of the Levite's Concubine (Judg 19).

238 Hobbs, "Man, Woman, and Hospitality," 95.

239 "The words may be a refusal of a gift she has not requested, and may not desire; they may imply distrust of the man of God or of his motives"; Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 62. Yet, if the woman found the prophet to be so untrustworthy why does she, of her own initiative, prepare a lodging for him in the first instance? It would seem that the Shunammite sees Elisha as more than trustworthy since she takes great pains to host him in her household.

the rape of the Levite's concubine and Tamar.[240] Shields justifies such an interpretation by saying that the negative particle plus vocative is used in the Shunammite's speech (2 Kgs 4:16) just as it is in Judg 19:23 and 2 Sam 13:12. However, to assert that the Shunammite is experiencing a rape of her will by Elisha's pronouncement is, at the very least, extreme and groundless within this narrative's context.

The role of hospitality in Akan culture is so central that often times visitors do not have to make prior arrangements but simply turn up and they receive an abundance of food, drink and if needed also a place to rest if they are coming from out of town. It is very usual in Ghana that clergymen, after preaching and teaching, are invited to a parishioner's house for refreshment and rest. The Shunammite's response "I live among my own people" would be a similar response of an Akan woman. Hospitality is not meant to be reciprocated. However, in Akan custom the host may oblige reciprocation at the extreme insistence of the guest.

The Great woman of Shunem's hospitality and kindness towards Elisha makes her a candidate, in his servant's eyes, for wom(b)anhood. In Akan girls are socialised to be good hostesses and always have food ready for any guests who may come home. While this connection may not be clear in the Hebrew narrative, from an Akan perspective a possible reason why Elisha prophesies a child for her is because in her kindness and care for him she has demonstrated that she will take care of a child.

The Nameless Son

Eventually the woman received what Elisha had promised. Interestingly, however, the miraculous son is nameless.[241] This is the only child of a former childless woman of whom we do not have a recorded name. It seems strange that an Israelite male child conceived by miraculous intervention would not have his name mentioned if only for genealogical reference.

That the son is unidentified has led to the conclusion that Elisha did not act on behalf of God.[242] Additionally, the son's namelessness is taken as

240 Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 62.

241 "About AD 1300 a Jewish writing, Sefer ha-Zohar, said Habakkuk was the son of the Shunammite woman whose life Elisha saved." This tradition developed because his name could stem from the Hebrew verb "to embrace" which then is believed to refer to the prophecy given to the Shunammite that she would embrace a son (2 Kgs 4:16); Barker and Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 255.

242 Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 126. *Contra*, Shemesh who believes that the child is not prominent because this narrative is primarily focused on the power of his

another indication that he is insignificant; "an anonymous peasant boy whose sole functions in the narrative are to be born and then to be brought back from the brink of death."[243] Admittedly, some of the special children are not round or complex characters like others.[244] However, anonymity is not necessarily an indication of insignificance, as in the case of Manoah's wife.

The reason why the son dies is unexplained. His complaint "my head, my head" could generate any number of explanations.[245] His father's quickness to, send him off to his mother is both characteristic and uncharacteristic of Akan Fathers. On one hand, it is usually seen as the woman's role to nurture and comfort a child in sickness and in health therefore women usually take care of ailing children (exemplified by the child's position in the Shunammite's lap). On the other hand, the Akan also have a belief that every human being has a *sunsum* (spirit) that is given by the father and meant to serve as a sort of protective force of the child. Thus a Father who is unable to protect a child and too quick to dismiss the child to his/her mother is deemed as irresponsible.

The miracle of resurrection makes this nameless boy one of the more unique characters in the HB. There is a tendency for several sons of formerly barren wives to have near-death experiences: Isaac is almost sacrificed (Gen 22); Jacob flees from his twin's murderous threat because of the stolen blessing of the Firstborn (Gen 27:41); Joseph is almost killed by his spiteful brothers (Gen 37:24); Samson has constant skirmishes with Philistines; and the Shunammite lady's son actually dies but is resurrected by Elisha.[246] The reason for permitting these near-death experiences, or actual death in this son's case, is that "if Yahweh fills the womb, then Yahweh has a particular claim on all that comes forth from it."[247] This nameless son is significant in the fact that he is the second person to be resurrected in general,[248] but the only miracle child

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prophet and not on the miraculous birth of the child; Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 20.

243 Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 126. Also, Cohn agrees "that this promised child will be different from his promised forebears, that unlike the other children born through miraculous conception, this one is not destined for greatness"; Cohn, *2 Kings*, 29.

244 For instance, compared with other miracle children Isaac is less complex or action-rich than others. However, he is still significant and instrumental to the progression of the *tôlĕdôt*.

245 For instance Sweeney sees that this is "seemingly fatal sunstroke"; Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 289.

246 Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 189–90.

247 Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 192.

248 Shemesh and others suggest that Elisha's miracle of resurrecting the Shunammite's son may have been the first resurrection in the HB. This interpretation stems from doubt as

within the barrenness tradition to die and be resurrected. While the son is nameless, and passive in character, he becomes a testament of YHWH'S power through Elisha. The miracle children are proven to be just that when they encounter near-death, or actual death, experiences and are saved.[249] Arguably the greatest miracle that could be performed, the resurrection of a human being, is reserved either for a helpless widow (2 Kgs 17) or a formerly barren woman. This signals a special relationship that YHWH extends to women within the barrenness tradition.[250]

Some interpreters of the Elisha cycle view this narrative as a satire, not only of the barrenness type-scene (in which women supposedly long for children), but also of the prophet Elisha.[251] Finlay asserts that it is characteristic in the Elisha cycle to see Elisha "usurping or minimizing the role of Yahweh."[252] According to Bergen this narrative questions whether Elisha's status is really superior to that of the Shunammite woman.[253] It is the Shunammite who "confers holiness on Elisha" in that she elevates him to distinction when she builds the annex for him.[254] Due to the son's later death, Amit suggests that this experience with the Shunammite is one that develops Elisha and teaches him "a lesson" about his human weaknesses.[255]

A few interpreters have posited not only that Elisha is shown in a negative light, but that he is also suspected as being the biological father of the child.[256]

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to whether Elijah really resurrected the widow of Zarephath's son. Shemesh reasons that the phrase "until he had no breath (נְשָׁמָה) left in him (1 Kgs 17:17)" is not necessarily an indicator of death as the prophet Daniel and the Queen of Sheba experience something similar (Dan 10:9, 17; 1 Kgs 10:5). In this case it is contended that Elijah did not perform the first resurrection in the HB but rather Elisha did; Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 23–24.

249 Ackermann adds that either miracle children must experience near-death, or actual death, experiences and be saved or they must be nazirites, as in the case of Samson and Samuel; Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, 205.

250 *Contra*, Fuchs who believes that the Shunammite has no relationship with Yahweh and is a disposable character; "as soon as the son's survival is ensured, the Shunammite disappears from the narrative scene"; Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, 61.

251 Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 97.

252 Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, 150.

253 Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 92.

254 Bergen, *Elisha and the End of Prophetism*, 92. Also, Kalmanofsky believes that the narrative diminishes Elisha's status as a holy man and prophet; Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 68.

255 Amit, "A Prophet Tested," 282.

256 Shields questioning the child's paternity due to the husband's little involvement in the narrative seems far-fetched; Shields, "Subverting a Man of God, Elevating a Woman," 64.

Such an interpretation requires stronger evidence than simply asserting that the Shunammite's husband is "emotionally detached from his son,"[257] thereby making Elisha the father of the child.[258] This interpretation by some Western scholars is quite remarkable since in the Western context a religious figure that sleeps with a "devotee" or "parishioner" would be guilty of abuse. There are narratives in the Ghanaian context of religious figures that claim to have power to heal barrenness and sleep with childless women, without or sometimes with the knowledge of their husbands, in order to unblock their wombs or bestow divine favour. Casting Elisha, however, as one such religious figure is not consistent with the HB narrative. Elisha's pronouncement "at this season, in due time, you shall embrace a son" is a prophetic witness to an impending miracle.

Elisha should not be characterised as completely infallible or entirely weak because the Elisha cycle highlights both the "the complexity and ambiguity of Elisha's depiction."[259] Elisha's prophetic announcement of the birth of the child is to be viewed as positively as Eli's announcement of Samuel's birth. Although, the level of expectation from hearing a prophetic promise would probably be higher than the expectation created by hearing a priestly blessing.[260] In both cases, these men of God take initiative without a direct speech from YHWH but such initiative is positive in the sense that the prophecies are realised. In each case the announcement is "an act of intercession with God, the Lord of nature."[261] It was acceptable then that "the promise was not explicitly from God, but from Elisha, the man of God who served as divine messenger."[262]

Ultimately, the Shunammite's miraculous conception and birth increases "her respect for the holiness of her guest."[263] The Shunammite's characterisation as a prominent and capable host does not necessitate a diminishment of Elisha's character. The Shunammite is not a contrasting character for Elisha but is rather a "foil for the king of Israel as she opts for prophetic consolation in a time of crisis. Situated in the north the great woman resists seeking other

257 Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 69.

258 Kalmanofsky asserts the intimacy of the Shunammite and Elisha that she interprets the woman grasping his genitals when her son dies because Elisha is the biological father. While feet are sometimes used euphemistically for genitals in the HB this is not an indication that this is what happened here; Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 70–71.

259 Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem," 111.

260 Interestingly, however, Hannah seems to respond with much more expectancy after the priestly blessing than the Shunammite does after the prophetic promise.

261 Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 251.

262 Cook, *Hannah's Desire, God's Design*, 24.

263 Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings*, 77.

deities and so furthers the diminution of northern royalty seen in the past few episodes."[264]

The Shunammite woman not only receives the miracle of reversed infertility but also experiences the reversal of death (2 Kgs 4:30–37). Instead of interpreting the boy's death as an indication of divine retribution,[265] it may rather function otherwise. After the death of the miracle child, Elisha feels compelled "to effect a miracle that exceeds the miracle of the annunciation of his birth."[266] In this way the theme of the infertility narratives is once again underscored; YHWH has the power, at times mediated through prophets or messengers, "to grant and save life."[267] Furthermore, it is the recounting of the miraculous birth, by Gehazi to the King, that impresses him so that the monarch returns her house, field and generously adds the income of the seven harvests that she missed while in Philistine territory, thereby saving the Shunammite and her son's life once again (2 Kgs 8:1–6).[268]

Conclusion to the Great Woman of Shunem

The Shunammite woman is the only one within the barrenness tradition to be granted a child as a repayment for a kindness (2 Kgs 4:14). The story is not concerned about the Shunammite's elevation at the cost of Elisha's diminishment. Rather, the story is about how a prophet may take concern and initiative to announce the fulfilment of the Shunammite's suppressed desire, a child.

While some see this narrative as a subversion of the patriarchal Hebrew societal norms, assuming that the Shunammite woman does not want a son in the first instance,[269] it more likely is an example how infertility can push one

264 Bodner, *Elisha's Profile in the Book of Kings*, 80. Also, Shemesh concludes, "so praise of the Shunammite matron does not necessarily imply criticism of Elisha. A story can contain more than one positive character and need not be a dichotomy between a praiseworthy woman and a blameworthy man of God"; Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 18.

265 "Behaving like God who promises children to the barren, Elisha may have overstepped his function as a man of God. The child's death may indicate that Elisha had no right promising a child in the first place"; Kalmanofsky, "Women of God," 71.

266 Shemesh, "The Elisha Stories as Saint's Legends," 25.

267 Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 289.

268 Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 289. *Contra* Roncace, who disagrees that 2 Kgs 8 legitimises Elisha's miracle and does not think the King grants the Shunammite the land "simply because she had been the beneficiary of one of Elisha's miracles"; Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem," 125.

269 Roncace, "Elisha and the Woman of Shunem," 126.

past the point of hope. However, the narrative does not give any indication that Great Woman of Shunem's prominence is diminished due to her childless state. Rather, in Elisha's perspective the Shunammite's hospitality and generosity make her a deserving candidate for motherhood. Elisha behaves as Eli does; he makes a prophetic announcement that is not directly initiated by Yahweh. However, since the prophecy is fulfilled in the birth of a son it may be concluded that Yahweh is happy to open the wombs of these women. The namelessness of the Shunammite's son does not equate to insignificance. Rather, he is twice a product of a miracle; at his birth and his resurrection. Promise and fulfilment are held in tension by the threat of death in this story. However, once again the infertility tradition highlights Yahweh's power to do what is humanly impossible.

On the one hand, the Shunammite is the epitome of a traditional woman who hosts spiritual leaders and subsequently brings blessings upon herself. On the other hand, she characterises a divergence from the norm in that she does not overtly protest her childlessness from the onset. Her lack of protest concerning her childlessness, and her cry not to be given false hope, may be resources for further consideration of other reasons for childlessness besides the biomedical factors often foremost in people's minds.

Conclusion

The infertility narratives in the Former Prophets make an interesting contribution to the barrenness tradition. The lives of these three women are not described as extensively in comparison with the Genesis stories of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel. We find in the stories of Manoah's wife and the Great Woman of Shunem a lack of protest that diverges from the other narratives already examined. It is interesting that in these two stories it is the Angel of YHWH or the man of God who takes the initiative in the woman having a child.

The story of Manoah's wife shows the way in which Yahweh can make a complete claim on the miracle child's life. Samson is called to a vocation by divine choice before he is even born and able to accept or reject the call. She is the first childless woman to have a private encounter with the Angel of YHWH. The nazirite dedication, which includes specific diet, hair and vocation, become important in interpreting the subsequent Samson narrative. The divine initiative and strict prescriptions given for the child serve to heighten expectation as to his success. In allowing Delilah to cut his hair, Samson cuts off the physical manifestation of his power but also his history as the child of a previously barren woman.

Samson's name is understood in the context of his interaction with Delilah but does not have much to do with the circumstance surrounding his conception or birth (unless we take the sun to be a metonym for YHWH). It is his hair, not his name or diet, that will be the symbol of his sacred devotion.

Hannah's narrative contains the most detail of the emotional reaction that an ancient woman may have had regarding her infertility. The interactions that other characters (Peninnah, Elkanah and Eli) have with her serve to advance the desperation of her situation. Her infertility is made more severe by the combative attitude of her rival-wife Peninnah. Elkanah's character is at once compassionate and somewhat unaware. His willingness to give Hannah a quality portion of the offering and to dialogue with her regarding her disposition is caring. However, his lack of understanding or frustration at her grief also makes him appear insensitive.

Hannah shows the extent of her grief and eagerness when she takes the initiative to enter the sanctuary without the mediation of any religious figure and is willing to make a permanent vow. Hannah's sacrifice is not in vain because her child becomes one of the most important figures within Israelite history. As a priest, prophet and judge, Samuel connects the people from the era of judges to that of the monarchy. Furthermore, Hannah's experience and her song highlight the reversal of shame and defeat that accompanied the birth of a child. In using warrior imagery to describe her situation Hannah emphasises the high esteem ascribed to mothers in the ancient world.

The Great Woman of Shunem is a unique character in that she has a relationship with Elisha that is unparalleled anywhere else in the HB. Yet, evidently from Gehazi and Elisha's point of view this woman's prominence could not provide her with the level of satisfaction that a child could. Both the Shunammite and her son are nameless but they become characters in the greatest miracle of Elisha's ministry: resurrection.

The narratives of Manoah's wife and the Shunammite challenge this study's thesis that all women went to great lengths in order to become wom(b)en; that is to become mothers. For unknown reasons, there is no account of their desire for children. However, we may see them as examples of how a tradition can contain characters that differ from the general trend. Still, whatever their comfort or satisfaction level at the outset of the story they do not reject the initiative taken by Yahweh or his representative. In fact, the Shunammite protests when her child dies, and her protest is what paves the way for his resurrection.

Conclusion to Part 1

The biological barrenness narratives depict the lives of women, who although similar, also differ in some respects. These stories highlight the social consequences of childlessness, such as strained sororal relationships or abusive rival-wives or frustrated husbands. The shame that accompanied infertility was too much for some of these women and they sought solutions that brought further complication into their lives.

Characters' pursuit to become wom(b)en is not always stated explicitly by the narrator. An argument could be made that some wives were satisfied with their infertile circumstance. However, the trend seems to be that even if accepted on a personal level infertility garnered pity or negative attention on a communal level. It is this concern for the honour and security of the women, and in Manoah's wife's case—the deliverance of the nation—that leads to their situations being reversed.

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PART 2

Social Barrenness

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Introduction to Part 2

Thus far we have encountered biological infertility in the barrenness tradition narratives. The birth type-scene has long been recognised as an essential part of the history of Israel.[1] However, this second section of the present work explores a type of barrenness that will be termed "social barrenness." Social barrenness refers to the condition of the women within the HB who biologically may be able to give birth but due to certain social circumstances, such as estrangement from a husband, rape, or widowhood, are unable to do so.

While the following narratives have not typically been included within the barrenness tradition, because they do not fit neatly into popular Western biomedical definitions of infertility, these narratives contain characters whose social situations render them childless. Some of the women are able to overcome the social obstacles to their childlessness; other women are not so fortunate.

Discussion of the following narratives will focus on marital estrangement, rape and widowhood as social obstacles to fertility. Estranged wives who are denied conjugal rights by their husbands face the challenge of not having the opportunity to conceive, much less to birth and rear children. Additionally, women known to have been sexually violated, while culturally and legally permitted to marry (either the rapist or another suitor), were possibly rendered unmarriageable and thus unable to have children. Furthermore, it will also be seen that widows who had no children, or surviving children, did not perceive of themselves differently than their married counterparts who had no children. Although of differing marital statuses, these women were all deemed to be barren in Hebrew, and larger ANE, culture. Whether for temporary or permanent periods these women all encounter the challenge of attaining wom(b)anhood, motherhood.

This section proposes that the women who can be classified as socially barren are the estranged wives Leah and Michal; the rape victims, Dinah and Tamar; and the widows Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah and Naomi and Ruth. These women have not conventionally been included within the barrenness tradition since on the surface their situations appear not to deal with infertility. Further, while scholarly interpretations of HB narratives are often set within their ANE context, Western biomedical definitions continue to dominate the discourse. This Western medicentrism often obscures the voices and experiences of people in traditional cultures, past and present, who experience

1 For a full summary of birth type-scene see Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, 91–92.

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barrenness even though they may never be "diagnosed" as such in the Western context.

I propose that social barrenness was viewed as equally unfortunate as the situations of the biologically barren wives. Indeed, in addition to the challenge of denied conjugal rights, the trauma of sexual violation and the death of a spouse, these women endured the added tragedy of childlessness, with all its social implications. In the following chapters we encounter women's experiences of social barrenness in the three categories of estrangement, rape and widowhood.

CHAPTER 6

Leah and Michal: Estranged Wives

Introduction

Leah and Michal are wives who experience estrangement from their husbands. The biggest challenge of this estrangement was that it affected each woman's ability to become a wom(b)an, that is to conceive and have children. Both women's fathers use them to trick or entrap the prospective suitor. While Leah's conjugal ban is temporary, Michal's is made permanent.

While there were laws to discourage and prohibit women from denying the conjugal rights of their husbands, the same expectation was not necessarily upheld for men.[1] For a wife to refuse her husband's sexual advances was regarded not only as a crime against him but also against Sumerian society and its goddess.[2] Such a wife, especially if reputed to be a less-than-ideal wife, "was to be thrown into the water according to ancient Sumerian law."[3] If, in Hammurabi's edict, the woman could prove that her husband had abandoned her then she could reclaim her dowry and return to her father's house.[4] The legal, spiritual and social consequences of denying conjugal rights were more severe for women.

Although not common there is a hint that perhaps in certain regions there was a contractual expectation for husbands not to deprive their wives of sexual needs.[5] This instance stipulated in an Egyptian marriage contract is a

1 Marsman has found one exceptional judicial ruling (cited by Anbar, "Textes de l'époque babylonienne ancienne," 120–125) that apparently granted a wife the right to refuse her husband sexual relations; Marsman, *Women in Ugarit and Israel*, 131. It seems that this ruling would have been an anomaly.

2 Kramer, "The Woman in Ancient Sumer," 110. Also, Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 32.

3 Delaporte, *Mesopotamia*, 77.

4 Delaporte, *Mesopotamia*, 77.

5 An Egyptian marriage contract regulates the refusal of conjugal rights for both the man and the woman. "And moreover, Ananiah shall not be able not to do the law of [one] or two of his colleagues' wives to Jehoishma his wife. And if he does not do thus, hatred [it is]. He shall do to her the law of hatred. And moreover, Jehoishma shall not be able not to do the law of one or [t]wo (of her colleagues' husbands) to Ananiah her husband. And if she does not do (so) for him, hatr (ed) (it) is." The idiom "hatred [it is]" explains that the refusal of conjugal rights "was tantamount to repudiation by conduct and required the requisite compensation" which included demotion in status and monetary fine. The husband's penalty would have probably

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monogamous marriage and therefore cannot be strictly compared to the polygynous marriage of which Michal and Leah were a part. The following section will examine these narratives in order to further highlight social barrenness as caused by estrangement and conjugal ban.

Leah's Narrative

Leah and Michal's narratives portray them, whether temporarily or permanently, as deprived wives. They are rendered childless due to estrangement from their husbands. Both women experience a conjugal ban in which they are deprived of their sexual rights, which are a prerequisite to conception and childbirth. While Leah's ban is eventually lifted, Michal's is permanent and she never has children.

Leah is first introduced as the eldest of Laban's daughters (Gen 29:16). Her name means "wild cow,"[6] "'strong woman' or, 'mistress'."[7] Leah will become the senior but unloved wife. This section explores the way in which Leah, although at first fertile, becomes socially barren and then seeks to overcome the barrier to her fertility.

The Eyes Have It

Once on the narrative stage Leah is immediately contrasted with her younger sister who has already met and spoken to Jacob at the well. Popular English translations of the Bible interpret the contrast between Leah and Rachel in the following way, "Leah's eyes were (רַכּוֹת) weak, but Rachel was beautiful of form and face" (Gen 29:17).[8] Readings in this vein suggest that Leah had an optical deformity that rendered her unsightly in Jacob's eyes.

The Hebrew adjective רַכּוֹת may be translated as "weak," "without lustre,"[9] or "tender."[10] Weak or deformed eyes were believed to be bad omens in the ANE. "If a woman gives birth, and (the child's) eyes are contorted—the owner of the house will not prosper. If a woman gives birth, and (the child's) eyes are

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been similar to the wife's penalty; Porten, "Document of Wifehood (2–30 October 420 BCE)," 185.

6 Arnold, *Genesis*, 266 (footnote 376).

7 Sarna, *Genesis*, 203.

8 NASB translation. The ESV, NIV, NLT all associate a kind of weakness with Leah's eyes.

9 Rad, *Genesis*, 291; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 462–63. Sarna also gives examples in 1 Sam 16:12 (David's eyes); Song 4:1, 9; Sarna, *Genesis*, 204.

10 Speiser, *Genesis*, 224.

blocked up that land will be laid waste, and there will be no offspring."[11] Thus, if Leah's eyes were disfigured in some way then most likely she would have been perceived as an unfortunate individual who would probably not have the best lot in life.

Yet, a survey of the lemma רַךְּ within the HB reveals other interpretive possibilities concerning the nature of Leah's eyes. The word רַךְּ is also used to describe tender or choice cattle ready to eat (Gen 18:7); a refined or couth woman (Deut 28:56; Isa 47:1); children of tender age (Gen 33:13; Prov 4:3); and gentle words and speech (Job 41:3; Prov 15:1; 25:15). In other contexts the term defines someone's youth and inexperience (1 Chr 22:5; 29:1), a person's lack of strength after killing another (2 Sam 3:39), the inexperience and inability to withstand worthless rogues (2 Chr 13:7), and the state of being fainthearted in the face of war (Deut 20:8). The instances describe tenderness, youthfulness, or a lack of superior strength. In the majority of its usages רַךְּ carries positive connotations of softness, gentleness, refinement and tenderness. The history of interpretation surrounding Leah's eyes have largely portrayed undesirability but a translation of Leah's eyes as delicate, gentle or tender may be more plausible.

The contrast between Leah and Rachel is not the "ugly duckling" versus the stunning beauty. Such a glaring contrast has been assumed because of other contrasts present in the story; one is older and the other is younger, one is fertile while the other is barren, one is loved while the other is hated. However, the contrast in terms of physical description is less stark and much more nuanced.

The focal point of Leah's beauty was her eyes,[12] whereas Rachel's beauty extended to her face and figure. Leah's eyes could in fact have been more than a beautiful feature. Another ANE omen states, "If a woman gives birth to a child with fluttering eyelids—that house will prosper."[13] It is not exactly clear what fluttering eyelids means, however, this omen text highlights that eyes were not only singled out for their deformity but also for shapes or movements that signalled prosperity. Considerable attention is given to the shape of a baby's eyes, as well as its placement on the face, that could indicate favourable or unfavourable incidents to befall the family or even the kingdom at large.[14] It is likely that Leah's beautiful eyes were believed, in her time and culture, to be a good omen

11 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 51. Tablet 2, lines 61–62.

12 Leah "had 'appealing' or 'pleasing' eyes … Leah was attractive enough in her own way but Rachel was stunning!" Arnold, *Genesis*, 266. Hamilton adds, "Leah may be older, but her eyes are the beautiful eyes of a person who looks much younger" (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 259).

13 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 38. Tablet 1, line 72.

14 Leichty, *The Omen Series Šumma Izbu*, 50–51. Tablet 2, lines 44–67.

of the prosperity she would bring to her family. Leah and Rachel had different kinds of beauty, and Rachel may have won "the first impression prize."[15]

"Behold, It was Leah!"

Seven years pass since Jacob's arrival in Haran (Gen 29:20). Jacob has worked for Laban in order to marry Rachel, or so he thinks. At the end of the seven years Laban throws a wedding feast and at the end of the evening Jacob goes in to consummate the marriage with his bride (Gen 29:22–23). "But it came about in the morning that, behold, it was Leah!" (Gen 29:25).[16] The poetic reversal of the wife-sister motif is evident here in the morning-after scene between Jacob and Leah; "well Jacob thought it was his wife, but it was only her sister."[17]

Leah utters no words before or after Jacob's recognition of her in the morning. The narrative conveys her as a silent woman. Her beautiful eyes and the night she has spent with her new husband are not enough to assuage Jacob's negative reaction. Jacob has met his match in Laban. He has finally been deceived and outwitted in the most devious way. He has been tricked into marrying the woman for whom he did not labour. Interestingly, the narrator's silence as to Jacob's reaction towards Leah leaves an ambiguity that will be characteristic of their relationship. Does Jacob have anything at all to say to Leah? What does he think or feel about her part, however limited, in this whole matter? Or does he simply ignore Leah because he knows that Laban is the one really responsible for the trickery?

Jacob confronts Laban with a succession of three questions: "What is this you have done to me? Was it not for Rachel that I served with you? Why then have you deceived me?" (Gen 29:25). The questions probably portray a confused Jacob who is still trying to comprehend the implications of seeing Leah, not Rachel, in his bed. The irony of the second question is that although Laban implied it he did not actually specify that he was going to give his daughter Rachel in marriage as he only says "her" (cf. Gen 29:19). This further highlights the cunning of the older man. The third question reveals that it is Laban, not Leah who is ultimately held responsible for this matter. It is unclear whether Jacob's stronger emotion is one of anger, disappointment, exasperation or all of the aforementioned. This lack of emotional description as related

15 Speiser, *Genesis*, 225.

16 If the interpretation of Leah's eyes as weak or disfigured is correct then there is more irony to be found in the wedding night scene. The visually impaired Leah knows what is going on in contrast to a sighted Jacob whose "normal" eyes cannot discern the deception in the dark.

17 Turner, *Genesis*, 129.

to his interactions with or concerning Leah will be evident throughout their relationship.

When challenged by Jacob as to the deception, Laban responds "It is not done thus in our place to give the younger before the firstborn" (Gen 29:26). Laban seems interested in preserving tradition and custom. Although Laban claims this one wonders if it is only an "honourable" excuse of getting as much labour out of Jacob as he can, two bridewealth payments worth—to be exact. Laban, the cunning father, however, does not realise that his apparent desire to adhere to custom will impact his eldest daughter more than he initially imagines.

An Akan reader is intrigued by Laban's character development. How does a father get to the point of exploiting his daughter? Looking back in the narrative we understand that Laban's initial reception of Jacob is hospitable. When Laban finds out that his maternal nephew is in town he runs to meet him, embraces him, kisses him and brings him home (Gen 29:13). Laban is no stranger to showing hospitality. When Abraham's servant arrived in Haran decades ago, Laban had been the one who received the traveller, fed his camels and washed the feet of Abraham's servants and his attendants (Gen 24:29–32). This is the welcome for which every visitor hopes. Jacob is at ease and tells his uncle about the incidences that led him to Haran (Gen 29:13).

For one month Laban hosts Jacob (Gen 29:14). It is at the month's end that we realize Jacob has perhaps suggested or rendered some kind of service to Laban. The older man states that just because Jacob is his relative it does not mean that he should render service without compensation (Gen 29:15). Here we see an uncle concerned about fairness and equity.

Jacob takes the opportunity to make his intentions known. In return for seven years of labour he will marry Rachel. Laban agrees in his reply, "It is better that I give her to you than to give her to another man; stay with me" (Gen 29:19). Jacob is the ideal marriage partner. In Akan culture the children of a brother and sister may marry but children of two brothers or two sisters may not.[18] Thus, Jacob's marriage to his mother's brother's daughters is legitimate.

In the ancient world, and even in many places today, relatives who find themselves in desperate or destitute circumstances are often vulnerable to further forms of abuse. Jacob, on the run from home, and fearing for his life is dependent upon the goodness of his uncle. Why does the brother who once asked if his sister could stay ten more days before leaving for her marital home now turn around and exploit her favourite son (Gen 24:55)? Rebekah trusts her brother enough to send her fugitive son to him. Laban ultimately betrays

18 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 21.

this trust. Rebekah is not the only woman to be betrayed by Laban; Leah will bear the brunt of her father's actions.

We may consider the interpretation of Laban as a concerned and hospitable uncle who begins with good intentions but succumbs to his own selfish interests. Laban may initially have intended to give Rachel in marriage to Jacob. It appears that initially Laban takes his responsibility as maternal uncle seriously, he emphasises that Jacob is his "bone" and "flesh" (Gen 29:14). Perhaps Laban thought that within the seven years a suitable spouse would present his marriage proposition to Leah. Yet as the seven years passed he did not find the kind of suitor he wanted for Leah and decided to make the switch.

Laban is very shrewd in arranging a marriage that primarily served his interests and not that of the other parties involved. Jacob explicitly states that he wants to marry Rachel. Laban, knowing this information, exposes his cunning for in marrying Leah off to Jacob he anticipates that Jacob will want to marry Rachel. Laban likely suspects that if he gives Rachel in marriage he will have to look for another suitor for Leah.

Leah's marriage does ensure that Laban fulfils the custom of giving away the eldest daughter in marriage before the younger. Yet it is primarily economic benefit, not the welfare of Leah, which motivates Laban's actions. The multiplication of cattle and flock under Jacob's role as herdsman brings Laban economic gain. Further, Leah's marriage to Jacob also produces multiple grandchildren for Laban, which will also add to his wealth.

Laban's trickery complicates the relationship between the two sisters. Did Rachel have knowledge of the bridal switch? Does Leah agree to the plan or is she coerced? Both women have their battles to fight, Leah for love and Rachel for children, but better between sisters than strangers. There is little cooperation between the women; in traditional society of the Akan people the cooperation between women is a strong feature for they are the ones that determine lineage. Thus, to an Akan person while the sisters had little choice about the deception they would find ways to cooperate and collaborate to advance their legacy and lineage.

Leah's marriage to Jacob does not testify to the unsuccessful nature of arranged marriages. Rather this scenario highlights the negative outcomes of forced or coerced marriages. Arranged marriages are often caricatured in Western literature and media. Arranged marriages are conflated with forced marriages. The difference between the two is that the former allows for the agency and free choice of the daughter/son involved. It is a contemporary bias to believe that marriages contracted in the West are "autonomous" and based on "love" while marriages contracted in other parts of the world are loveless and examples of human right abuses. There is a clear difference between

arranged marriages, which has been the standard practise of marriage in many cultures around the world throughout human history, and forced marriages.

Leah: Hated but Blessed

Unlike Rebekah, Leah needs no intercession by her husband for YHWH takes immediate action on her behalf and gives her conception. She is also the wife that bears the most children. The notice that "Leah was hated" (Gen 29:31) is harsh. How can Jacob, so capable of emotion and affection, "hate" the woman who may have also been the victim of her Father's deception?[19] This harsh statement of Jacob's "hate" towards Leah is softened in prevalent translations "he loved Rachel more than Leah." In this sense the comparative use of *min* implies that Jacob loved Leah to an extent, even if it did pale in comparison to what he felt for Rachel.

However, the comparative translation "Leah was loved less" is problematic in that שְׂנוּאָה is used in contexts of relational rejection or exclusion.[20] "Hate" does not so much denote an emotional feeling as it does convey a state of rejection.[21] Here, Deut 21:15–17 is helpful in describing the scenario of a man who has two wives; one who is loved and the other is hated. The sense is that one wife is favoured above the other, for reasons not stated. The state of "hate" seems to describe choosing something/someone over and above another thing/person. Later YHWH is said to hate Esau in the context of choosing Jacob (Mal 1:3). The paucity of information about Jacob's interaction with Leah is telling. Rachel was Jacob's choice, Leah was not. The older sister must endure the reality that her younger sister, in Jacob's eyes, is the preferred and chosen wife.

It is precisely because Leah is hated that YHWH opens her womb (Gen 29:31). Just as in Deut 21:15–17, the unloved wife here is provided for and protected by YHWH himself. This is the story of "God's discriminatory perspective towards Leah."[22] Indeed, "the narrator juxtaposes the action and attitude of Jacob towards Rachel with those of God towards Leah."[23] While Jacob chooses Rachel above Leah he "cannot apportion God's promise of progeny to his preferred wife, Rachel."[24] This two-fold reality in Leah's life pushes her character's

19 We may question the extent of Leah's knowledge of Laban's deception and whether she is a willing or coerced participant; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 262.

20 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 261 (footnote 10).

21 Speiser, *Genesis*, 230.

22 Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 165.

23 Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 165.

24 Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 166.

development as Jacob's least favoured wife but also as the prime recipient of YHWH's progeny promise.

Leah gives birth to four sons and names them according to her experience. YHWH has noticed her affliction (Reuben), YHWH has heard that she is hated (Simeon), Jacob will be joined to her (Levi), and she will praise YHWH (Judah).[25] Of the naming occasions recorded in the HB, women are twice as likely to name their babies than are men.[26] This fact is noteworthy since in patrilineal cultures it is typically men who name their children. Why this deviation from the patrilineal norm? Several of the barrenness narratives suggest a good reason. Women who overcome significant obstacles in order to have children become the exception to the patrilineal rule. They make their mark and memorialise their feat in the act of naming their child.

We see a similar rationale for deviating from the norm within the Akan culture. Customarily new parents would consult the senior woman within the matrilineage concerning a suitable name for the infant. However, with the advent of colonisation came the practise of paternal surnames and paternal leadership in naming ceremonies. This in turn gave rise to a practise, deviating for the matrilineal norm, where fathers began to take more and more responsibility in naming the children. Still, traditionalists would attempt to honour custom by stipulating that a man must name his first child after his own mother.[27] Today there is an increasing number of Akan people, particularly those in Ghanaian urban areas but also those in the diaspora, who are unaware that the root tradition is that one's matrilineage must be prioritised in the choice of name and in the outdooring or naming ceremony. Deviations from the norm are attempts for women in patrilineal contexts, and men in matrilineal contexts, to make their mark.

There exists another interpretive possibility; Akan readers may suspect that in naming her children Leah intentionally diminishes the father's role and paternity. If Jacob makes it clear that Leah was not chosen or preferred then it

25 Gen 29:31–35.

26 Arnold, *Genesis*, 268. Lot's daughters (Gen 19:37–38); Leah and Rachel (Gen 29:31–30:24); Shua the wife of Judah (Gen 38:3–5); Pharaoh's daughter (Ex 2:10); Manoah's wife (Judg 13:26); Hannah (1 Sam 1:20); Phinehas' wife (1 Sam 4:21); The young woman (Isaiah 7:14); Jabez's mother (1 Chron 4:9); Maacah (1 Chron 7:16). Genesis 4:1 may suggest that Eve is the one who names Cain. Also, Ruth's son, Obed, is named by the neighbourhood women (Ruth 4:17). For more information see Bridge, "A Mother's Influence: Mothers Naming Children in the Hebrew Bible," 392–394.

27 For more information on naming practice, see chapter 3. Traditionally, a man names his first child after his mother even if it is a boy it is given a masculine form of the name. There is also another option to name the child after someone from the matrilineage.

may be that Leah too is suggesting that Jacob is also less than ideal. Yet this suspicion is quashed by the text since, at least in the naming of her first three sons, Leah is yearning for Jacob's love and recognition. In the birth of Reuben (YHWH has seen my affliction) she longs for her husband's love. Her second son's name, Levi, is preceded by the statement "because YHWH has heard that I am hated, he has therefore given me this son also." At the birth of her third son, Levi, Leah expresses great hope "now this time my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons" (Gen 29:32–34). For Leah the issue is not sororal rivalry of the normal kind but rather the struggle of an unloved wife who wishes to gain the affection of her husband through multiple births.[28] Even in the counter-customary act of naming her own children within a patrilineal context, Leah grieves the second place that she holds.

Curiously, although YHWH has opened her womb Leah soon realises that she is unable to give birth to more children (Gen 30:9). An obstacle to Leah's wom(b)anhood is apparent. Here Leah's situation may be described in Western biomedical terms as "secondary infertility": the case of a woman who has had one or more children but is then unable to conceive. When Leah is interpreted through purely Western lenses the gravity of her concern is minimized, even eliminated. Why should a woman who has had four biological children concern herself with the fact that she cannot have anymore? Yet, in traditional Akan context, as in other non-Western cultures, women are socialised to give birth to as many children as possible and four, while more than adequate by Western standards, is regarded as modest in past and present traditional cultures.

Since Leah is unable to give birth to more children she gives her maid Zilpah to Jacob for this purpose (Gen 30:9). In Hurrian society it may have been customary for wealthy families to give a maid to the bride[29] for the very reason of having a surrogate nearby. The maid Zilpah gives birth to two sons, Gad and Asher (Gen 30:10–13).[30] Leah's remark that women will call her blessed underlines the significance that the community ascribed to a woman at the occasion of each birth.

Yet, while women will call her fortunate or happy, Leah's subsequent actions show that this communal accolade is not enough. There is an Akan proverb that perhaps describes Leah's sentiment, *wo nsa akyiri bɛyɛ wo dɛ a, ɛnte sɛ wo nsayam* meaning "even if the back of your hand tastes good to you, it is still not

28 Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 167.

29 Speiser, *Genesis*, 227. Speiser cites Nuzi tablet HSSV (1929), No 67, which documents the case of a young noble lady who is given a slave girl of the time of her marriage.

30 Gad meaning "fortune" and Asher meaning "happiness."

like the palm of your hand."[31] This adage communicates that having one's own biological children (represented by the palm of the hand) is more pleasurable and conducive than gaining children through surrogacy, adoption and other means (represented by the back of the hand). Leah is jubilant at the birth of Gad and Asher but she is not wholly satisfied. Leah's subsequent words and trade with Rachel will reveal that neither woman hold their servant-surrogate's sons in the same regard as biological children.[32] Both women are determined to have as many biological children as possible.

The Trade: Mandrakes for My Man

As the narrative develops Leah's characterisation takes on additional dimension. In the next scene she is not the exploited daughter or eager new bride but is the outspoken sister confronting her co-wife. Leah shows that she knows how to make the most of her resources and circumstances.

During the wheat harvest Reuben finds mandrakes in the field and brings them to his mother Leah (Gen 30:14). As mentioned earlier, mandrakes[33] were thought to have aphrodisiac and fertility powers.[34] As the firstborn son Reuben is probably becoming aware of the societal expectations of men and women. This is an intentional search for mandrakes not just an incidental stumbling upon them. Seeing his mother's desire but inability to have more children Reuben wants to assist her. From Leah's last speech it seems that she is content after the birth of her last son by surrogacy (Gen 30:13). However, this will be clarified in the following exchange with her sister and rival wife, Rachel.

Rachel knows that Reuben has found some mandrakes and she dares to ask Leah for some of them. Rather than give a direct response, Leah's answer is in the form of two questions. "Is it a small thing for you to take my man? Now are you going to take my son's mandrakes also?" (Gen 30:15). Leah is irritated, possible angered, by he little sister's request. Furthermore, in using the expression "take my man," she conveys her impression that Rachel possesses Jacob in a way that she does not.[35] Leah not only feels deprived of her husband but also

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31 For more on adoption and surrogacy in Akan see Chapter 3, section "solutions sought for infertility."

32 Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, 118.

33 Cf. Rachel's narrative in chapter four.

34 Additionally, in Egyptian love songs mandrakes were also compared with a woman's body, "her breasts are mandrake blossoms"; Matthews and Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels*, 298.

35 Finlay notes that this estrangement seems to be suggested in Leah's remark about Rachel stealing her husband; Finlay, *The Birth Report Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, 118.

feels a need to defend her firstborn. Leah's reference to her "son's mandrakes" is curious since they are for *her* use and *not* Reuben's—unless Leah does not intend to make use of them. The latter point is what the narrative seems to suggest as the scene develops. Leah is willing to part with the mandrakes; what she wants is her man.

The narrative's depiction of the rivalry between these sisters and co-wives is palpable. Yet, each woman has her own reasons for competing with the other; "Leah's lack is the love of her husband. Rachel's subsequent lack is sons to her husband."[36] Rachel fails to answer Leah's questions. The communication between the rival wives is sparse, but the sisters agree upon a bargain; Leah will give up her mandrakes in exchange for *one* night with Jacob (Gen 30:15). It is only at this point in the narrative that it becomes evident that Leah's barrenness is not biological but social. A wife has to bargain and trade resources for one night with her man; this is Leah's frustration.

Leah's trading of mandrakes for her man, from an Akan point of view, is unfortunate. In this traditional culture a man who believes he is ready for polygynous marriage will be admonished concerning his responsibilities, he must note that it is duty to provide for all the needs of all his wives, including sexual intimacy. Wives should not have to resort to trading and bargaining with their co-wives for any needs, particularly the conjugal rights. Such scenario of deprivation, sexual or otherwise, is not only cause for concern but also often enough reason for marriage dissolution. Since multiple children are desired in polygynous marriages, the reason for Jacob's cessation of sexual intimacy with Leah is likely not for contraceptive purposes but another indication of his rejection of Leah and his choice for Rachel. A conjugal ban, especially for the first wife, however is dishonourable and, in traditional contexts, defeats the purpose of marriage.

Cause of Leah's Infertility: Denied Conjugal Rights

Leah becomes socially barren (Gen 29:35) because Jacob deprives her of conjugal rights.[37] Leah's birth of four sons without any complication now implicates Jacob as the problem behind her childlessness.[38] Is Jacob trying to enforce the harshest contraceptive measure by ceasing to have a sexual relationship with Leah? Admittedly, some contraceptive measures are attested in the ANE; however, it was generally thought that the more children one could have the better.

36 Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 168.

37 Sarna, *Genesis*, 207.

38 "Having borne four children she has served her purpose and Jacob need trouble her no further"; Turner, *Genesis*, 130.

Having four sons would not be reason for a husband to terminate sexual activity with his wife. The more plausible interpretation is that Rachel is the reason why Jacob has not been sleeping with Leah. As the narrator notes that Rachel is jealous of her sister (Gen 30:1), it may not be a stretch to conclude that Rachel did not want her sister having additional children so that she would not have to compete with her in this area. How easy it would be for a beloved and favourite wife to make demands on the husband's time and dissuade him from having sexual relations with her.

In spite of Rachel's influence on Jacob, Leah is finally able to be with her husband again. The first wife does not wait for Jacob to come to her tent but goes out to meet him. Her words, "to me you will come," are bold and betray the fact that Jacob has been denying Leah her conjugal rights (Gen 30:16).[39]

Leah, on the one hand, could have used the mandrakes for their alleged aphrodisiac property, to become more desirable to Jacob. Leah did not need the mandrakes for their fertility powers, for that she needed Jacob. Rachel, on the other hand, already desirable to Jacob, wanted the mandrakes for their fertility properties.

It is only at the scene where she and Rachel bargain for an exchange of mandrakes and a night with Jacob that it becomes apparent that Jacob has been denying Leah her conjugal rights. From an Akan perspective, while regarded as the head of the household, Jacob has no right to deny Leah her conjugal rights. Were Leah to report Jacob to her parents it would become a serious matter, one that could lead to divorce if Jacob did not change his ways. The extended period of sexual isolation that Leah experiences would not be permitted in a polygynous Akan marriage. This, rather than a biological problem, is the cause of Leah's barrenness. She is a deprived wife that must buy a night with her own husband. Jacob is the cause of the cessation in Leah's wom(b)anhood.

Ironically, "Leah, who gives up the mandrakes bears three children; Rachel, who possesses them, remains barren for apparently three more years."[40] The trade is fruitful, "God gave heed to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son" (Gen 30:17). One night is enough to bring resumption to the relationship between Leah and Jacob. One night leads to other nights shared by the couple. Leah and Jacob have not one but three more children.

Leah's quick succession of births is ideal when it comes to birthing practise in Akan society. Traditionally, when couples are married they are often told in obvious and subtle ways to begin having children immediately. Usually family members will mention their expectation to come back *afe sɛsɛbrɛ* "this time

39 Alter, *Genesis*, 160.

40 Sarna, *Genesis*, 209.

next year" for the naming ceremony. The use of contraceptive methods is not so much of a priority. An Akan woman is regarded as blessed by God if she conceives shortly after the marriage and is also able to have her children in quick succession. In this sense Leah is the epitome of a celebrated Akan woman. Any depressed feeling resulting from a husband's lack of love would have been lessened by her position of importance within the family.

Leah had six sons, two surrogate sons and one daughter, thus nine children in total. In Akan culture, mothers of multiple children are celebrated and lauded. Although she does not reach the idealized Akan number of ten children, from an Akan perspective Leah is an accomplished wife who has been able to honour not only her husband but also her extended family.

From an Akan perspective, Leah is an honourable wife from the moment she begins to bear children. The community around her would have elevated her position from that time onwards. Privately, Rachel may have held a monopoly on Jacob's affections but publicly it would be Leah who would hold the position of important wife. Whatever affection she lacked from Jacob would have been lavished on Leah by extended family, friends, and the community at large. The biblical narrative and the Akan interpretation arrive at the same conclusion: Leah the unloved wife overcomes her social barrenness. She attains resumption in conjugal relations, bears more children, her husband is buried beside her, and most importantly, Leah's descendants are the ones who carry the rights of royalty and priesthood. However, there is an important difference between the Hebrew narrative and this Akan interpretation. In the Akan context Leah holds a prominent position from the very beginning whereas in the biblical narrative Leah's triumph is only complete after the death of Rachel.

Conclusion to Leah's Narrative

Leah's narrative provides helpful insight into our understanding of the factors that lead to a social barrenness experience and in this way it is important to the barrenness tradition. Leah's use of surrogacy during her estrangement from Jacob is not a satisfactory permanent solution for her. Eventually, she wishes to have more biological children of her own.

Leah's period of barrenness as a result of Jacob's denial is instrumental in an Akan perspective. Leah turns her attention to the two sons given to her by her maidservant. Unlike Sarah, who mistreats or expels the child of another woman, Leah names and embraces them as her own. A connection may be seen here with the Akan tradition of an infertile woman caring for an *akuaba* doll. In this case a woman who wants children carries around a carved doll and cares for it as if it were her child. As the gods observe her care for the doll and

her general character they decide to give her children of her own.[41] Perhaps, Leah's care for her children born through surrogacy proves her worthy of more children; YHWH blesses her with more sons and a daughter.

Again the infertility narrative, which has the fertility of the elder but unloved wife and the infertility of the younger and loved wife woven into it, stresses that it is only divine intervention that can "overcome the initial threat that God's promise of descendants to Jacob would go unfulfilled."[42] Leah, favoured or not by her husband, becomes the wom(b)an that she wants to be.

Although Jacob loved Rachel he buried Leah in the burial grounds of his family and when he was dying he wished to be buried there with Leah, his first wife (Gen 49:29–33).[43] While Leah endured a period of conjugal deprivation it appears that she was able to overcome this social obstacle. Whatever Jacob's feelings, the conclusion of Leah's narrative is that she appears ultimately to have held the preeminent position of the fertile first wife in a husband's household.

From an Akan perspective Leah is a typical example of the unloved or least favoured wife. While Leah may be unloved in comparison to Rachel, in an Akan reading Leah is still the preeminent wife not only because she is the first wife but also because she bears the most children. The Hebrew narrative's notice that Jacob is buried beside Leah is very important from an Akan perspective. One's funerary rites are as important as any other rite of passage so the fact that Jacob insists on being buried in the ancestral burial plot and beside Leah is significant for an Akan reading (Gen 49:29–33).[44] Leah may have not received the affection due to a wife but she received the honour and privilege that was hers as a first wife.

Michal: The Estranged Wife

Michal's characterisation at her introduction is in stark contrast with her portrayal at the end of her narrative. In the beginning the princess is the besotted

41 Cf. Chapter three.

42 Ross-Burstall, "Leah and Rachel," 168.

43 Other previously barren women whose burial place is specified are Sarah, Rebekah and Leah; Steinberg, "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle," 184.

44 Of course the argument can also be made that the only reason why Jacob was buried with Leah is because Rachel died on their travels and therefore had to be buried *en route* (Gen 35:19). Yet, Jacob could also have ordered his sons to go and retrieve Rachel's bones and bury them alongside him but he did not.

bride who helps David flee her father's murderous intent. At the end of the narrative, Michal is a begrudging wife who despises David's self-abasement before the ark, a symbol of his divinely initiated kingship. David's political concern for his burgeoning dynasty, rather than Michal's change from her former besotted self, is probably what motivates David to deny Michal of her conjugal rights, thus rendering her childless. Unlike Leah, Michal's estrangement is permanent; the narrative records no resumption in her and David's relationship.

Michal: Love-struck Princess (1 Sam 18–19)

Michal makes her first narrative appearance as the youngest daughter of King Saul (1 Sam 14:49–51). Michal's narrative is set within the politically tense environment of Saul's weakening reign. The tension exists because of YHWH's regret[45] that he had installed Saul as King of Israel (1 Sam 15:35) and the entrance of a new character that is about to be thrust into prominence. David, a young shepherd from Bethlehem has been engaged as Saul's armour bearer and music therapist (1 Sam 16:21–23). Described as "ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance," David has been secretly anointed by the prophet Samuel to be the next King of Israel (1 Sam 16:12–13). Furthermore, he is also on the rise as the national hero who has killed Goliath, the Philistine menace (1 Sam 17:40–54).

Interestingly, however, it is not the actual act of David's execution of Goliath that sparks Saul's jealousy but another incident. David's promotion to General of Saul's Army was pleasing to Saul's servants and the general populace (1 Sam 18:5). Yet, it is not until the women begin to compose and perform songs and dances celebrating David's prowess that Saul begins to spiral from insecurity to murderous attempts. The female chorus of "Saul has slain his thousands and David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18:6) and the female dance and instrumental performance are oracular for Saul. From this moment on Saul begins to suspect David (1 Sam 18:9). Even in patriarchal societies women's words, songs, dances and instrumentation should be of important note. The Akan, like some other traditional cultures, intuitively believe that women's words and songs may represent realities that go unobserved by men. Further, through songs and dances women may bear witness to or create phenomena that are good or bad omens. The singing and dancing women highlight a motif evident in the Davidic narrative; women, through their words and actions, anticipate and perpetuate David's religio-political career.[46]

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45 Reminiscent of YHWH's regret that he had made humankind (Gen 6:6).

46 Michal is David's first wife before he becomes King. Ahinoam of Jezreel is David's first wife after he is made King in Hebron. Abigail of Carmel is Nabal's "beautiful" and "wise"

Twice, Saul tries to pierce David through with his spear (1 Sam 18:10–11). Ironically, Saul's sinister intention gives David more opportunity to gain popularity (1 Sam 18:13, 16). King Saul is afraid of David for the important reason that he knows YHWH is with David (1 Sam 18:12, 14–15). Thinking that he is ensuring David's doom, Saul decides to give him his daughter Merab as a bride so that David will remain a loyal warrior and eventually get himself killed by the Philistines (1 Sam 18:17). However, in a sudden change of mind as is characteristic of the monarch's manic episodes, Saul marries Merab off to to Adriel the Meholathite (1 Sam 18:18–19).

It is at this juncture in David's rise, and Saul's murderous schemes, that the narrator adds a further twist to the tale, "now Michal, Saul's daughter, loved David" (1 Sam 18:20). The plot and its politics are about to get complicated.[47] David is not only beloved by the Jonathan, Judah, and Israel but also by Michal.[48] This is "the only instance in all biblical narrative in which we are explicitly told that a woman loves a man."[49] Usually within the HB, love is the action of one who is politically or socially superior to the recipient of the affection.[50] This is why usually it is men who are said to love women, or parents who are said to love their children or Yahweh who is said to love Israel.[51] As a princess Michal is superior to David the national hero and therefore it is acceptable for the narrator to note her love for David.[52] However, it is not just Michal's superiority that

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wife who saves David from bloodshed and revenge and becomes David's wife after Nabal's death (1 Sam 25:3, 33, 39). Bathsheba's son Solomon will eventually build the temple thereby solidifying the David's religio-political legacy. The wise woman of Tekoa leads David to bringing Absalom back, this will be a key move when Absalom later tries to usurp his father's throne. The whole nation will know that David tried to act justly with Absalom.

47 The announcement of Michal's love for David "introduces Michal as a chief actor in the politics of kingship in Israel"; Solvang, *A Woman's Place Is in the House*, 87. Soon it will be seen in Michal's narrative that this "is not blind infatuation, but a conscious decision regarding political loyalty and royal destiny"; Solvang, *A Woman's Place Is in the House*, 88.

48 The narrator does not share the reasons behind Michal's love. It could be one or more of several possibilities: 1) his ability to deal with Saul's manic episodes through his skilful musicianship 2) that he is an underdog turned national hero 3) his valour 4) his prudent speech 5) the fact that YHWH is with him (cf. 1 Sam 16:18). Additionally, as Solvang points out David is the object of everyone's love at one point: Saul, Jonathan, Michal, Judah and Israel (1 Sam 16:21; 18:1, 3–4, 16, 20, 22); Solvang, *A Woman's Place Is in the House*, 87.

49 Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 118.

50 "The party who is described using the terms *'āhēb* or *'ahăbâ* is typically the hierarchically superior party in the relationship"; Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political," 447. The exception seems to be in the case of the two lovers in the Song of Songs who both express love.

51 Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political," 447.

52 Ackerman, "The Personal Is Political," 452.

is being underlined here but also in emphasising her love the narrator brings Michal in allegiance with David just as Jonathan and all Israel and Judah are (1 Sam 18:1, 14). This allegiance will be demonstrated in a significant initiative that Michal takes. Yet, the notice of Michal's love will be set in stark contrast with her disdain at the close of the narrative.

The princess' love for David is not just internal imaginings for others report it to Saul. Again, the king sees another opportunity to ensnare David. He again offers David the chance to become his son-in-law (1 Sam 18:21). Michal's love is about to be exploited for the sinister game that Saul is playing. Here, Saul is characterised not only as an insecure ruler who is threatened by a young warrior, but also as a father who is willing to use his daughters as pawns in his political power plays.

Saul cunningly sets a bridewealth that is high enough to attract David's need to "earn" the right to marry the king's daughter and dangerous enough to satisfy Saul's sinister wish of David being killed by the Philistines (1 Sam 18:22–25). One hundred Philistine foreskins is the price.[53] The bridewealth was necessary in order to bring honour to the marriage. In early Sumerian times bridewealth was more likely "a large gift of foodstuff, clearly meant for a banquet preceding the wedding."[54] In the Old Babylonian period the customary bridewealth could be anything between five to thirty shekels of silver, which could also be paid in animals.[55] In royal marriages gifts were given and may have then be calculated in terms of silver.[56] It seems from these general findings of ANE bridewealth that Saul's request was not only unusual but also extremely excessive. After all, killing one hundred Philistines, in order to get their foreskins, was an unsuitable bridewealth since it held no monetary value or use as food in a wedding banquet.

Nevertheless, David brings Saul *two* hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Sam 18:27). Yet again David has outdone Saul and likely increased the extent of Michal's love. It has been asserted that by omitting any notice of whether David loves Michal the narrator suggests that, "David's motives are as purely political as Saul's."[57] What is clear is that Michal's love is strong enough for Saul's intents and purposes. What is not clear is how Saul intended Michal to "become a

53 The foreskins are to be seen "synecdochically as a body part representing the whole person"; Olyan, *Rites and Rank*, 66. "Uncircumcised Philistine" is a common phrase to describe the entire person (Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chr 10:4).

54 Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," 126.

55 Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," 126.

56 Stol, "Women in Mesopotamia," 126.

57 Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 22.

snare" to David (1 Sam 18:21). Perhaps he felt that love would weaken the focus of this warrior thus making him vulnerable in battle or that the princess could be "turned" and used to weaken her new husband. Probably, Saul's idea is to retain a position of control by keeping David close. However, it does not take the king long to realize that the extent of Michal's love is actually a hindrance not a help (1 Sam 18: 28–29). Indeed, "instead of becoming a snare to David, Michal's love becomes a snare to Saul."[58] The next time Michal enters the narrative she will have developed from love-struck princess to an intuitive and sharp-witted wife.

Michal's position, from an Akan perspective, is abnormal. The princess's love for David, which Saul sees he can exploit, is the reason she is given in marriage to him. The suitor, not the bride's family, typically initiates traditional marriages. In Akan society, the suitor's family initiates the marriage proposal through the *kɔkɔɔkɔ* (knocking) ceremony. The ceremony allows the prospective groom's family to formally "knock" at the prospective bride's house and express to her family their interest in marrying her. Nowhere in the narrative do we get a sense that David's family is involved in the marriage negotiation. Further, from a customary perspective it is seen as desperate for a woman's family to take the initiative of approaching a young man, or his family, in order to initiate a marriage proposal and contract. One would wonder if David and Michal's marital estrangement was foreshadowed by the fact that they did not start off in the "right" way, the right way being that the prospective groom, or his family representative, should first express love for the intended bride.

Michal: The Sharp-witted Wife

The marriage between David and Michal is not enough to stay Saul's death plots. Jonathan manages to convince the king to spare David from death (1 Sam 19:1–7). However, one day "an evil spirit from Yahweh" descends on Saul (1 Sam 19:9). The Sovereign who happens to be holding a spear while David is strumming his instrument attempts to pierce David through with the spear (1 Sam 19:10). Fleeing for his life David escapes to his house but Saul's officials arrive later, waiting to carry out Saul's murderous plan the next morning (1 Sam 19:11).

At this point Michal re-emerges in the narrative. The young wife knows what David apparently does not, "if you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be put to death" (1 Sam 19:11). This is the first direct speech that Michal makes and it shows that she knows her father well and has observed his growing hatred and fear of David. Instinctively, Michal urges David to climb down

58 Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 22.

the window in order to escape (1 Sam 19:12). Like Rahab, Michal is responsible for saving someone to the detriment of the people/dynasty to which she belongs (Josh 2:15). The consequence of this heroic act will become evident as the narrative unfolds; "in saving David from Saul, Michal loses him."[59]

The princess not only plans this quick escape but also engineers a diversion plan. In order to give David an advantage before the servants pursue him Michal takes a *teraphim*, places some goat's hair on its head, covers it with clothes and tucks it inside the bed (1 Sam 19:13). The use of goat's hair in a deceptive plan is reminiscent of Rebekah's idea to put goatskin on Jacob's arms and neck so as to deceive the aged Isaac into blessing him (Gen 27:16). Furthermore, Michal's shrewdness is evocative of Rachel's deception concerning her Father's *teraphim* (Gen 31:9). Like Rachel and Rebekah, Michal assumes the trickster role to achieve her own purpose, or the purpose of her man.

When Saul's officials come to seize David Michal quickly replies that he is sick. She must have implied a serious sickness for the servants to have delayed in carrying out the king's orders. When this is reported to Saul he insists that David be brought to him, if even on his sick bed (1 Sam 19:15). It is at this time that the officials discover that the form in the bed is the *teraphim* not David (1 Sam 19:15). Michal has managed to divert and delay Saul's purposes. When Saul confronts his daughter about her deception, Michal denies that she had any willing part in it much less was she the instigator of the escape plan. Saul's question, "Why have you רִמִּיתַנִי (deceived me)? (1 Sam 19:17) is almost identical to Jacob's question to Laban after he finds out he has just consummated his marriage with Leah not Rachel (Gen 29:25).[60] Ironically, later when Saul visits the Medium of Endor in disguise she will ask him the same question לָמָּה רִמִּיתָנִי "why have you deceived me" when she discovers his true identity (1 Sam 28:12). It seems that Michal has learned something from her father. Rather, than admit to the deception she plays the victim's role by asserting that David gave her a death threat while he escaped (1 Sam 19:17).

Michal's shrewdness and sharp-witted nature enables David to escape the murderous plot of her father Saul (1 Sam 19:11–17). The narrative characterises her as a loyal wife who chooses her husband's life over her father's jealousy. Knowingly or not, by her insistence that David flee for his life, Michal launches David into the next phase of his political career as a contestant for the throne.[61]

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59 Exum, "Murder They Wrote," 24.

60 Gen 29:25 does not have the adverb כָּכָה as it is in 1 Sam 19:17.

61 Solvang, *A Woman's Place Is in the House*, 94–95.

Michal: The Contested Wife

While David was on the run, Saul gives Michal in marriage to Palti (1 Sam 25:44).[62] This is interesting for the Akan reader who perceives Saul's ability to contract and dissolve his daughter's marriages as similar to male roles in traditional Akan marriage. It is not clear what connection Palti has with the royal house and why he is chosen as a groom. In giving Michal to Palti in marriage Saul perhaps makes another political move; he voids any right to the throne that David could make through marriage.[63]

Besides the obvious emotional impact of such a decision on Michal, Saul's action is also one that lacks honour and social grace. According to the Laws of Eshnunna §25 a Father-in-law who gave his daughter in marriage to another man was required to pay back double the bridewealth that he received from the son-in-law.[64] While it is not clear if there was an identical practise within Hebrew culture, if this is used as a guide then Saul would have been bound to provide four hundred Philistine foreskins,[65] which of course he could not or would not do. Michal's being given to Palti not only highlights the narrative refrain that Saul is afraid of David but also that in wanting to delegitimise David's claim to the throne Saul is actually casting a shadow of illegitimacy on the marriage between Michal and Palti. Michal and Palti cannot be true husband and wife if Saul has not given back the bridewealth that he received from David. This is why the narrator emphasises that Michal is "David's wife" (1 Sam 25:44).

Furthermore, evidence concerning ANE kingship suggests that thrones were not inherited through the king's daughter unless all her brothers died and even in that instance it was more typical that her son, not her husband, would reign.[66] This then shows the extent of Saul's fear of David and his paranoia/mania. Saul was putting measures in place to prevent a kingship practise that really was not attested anywhere throughout the ANE.

What was Saul's reason for arranging a second marriage for Michal? A survey of legal material from Eshnunna, Babylonia and Assyria may suggest that

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62 Called Paltiel in 2 Sam 3:15.

63 Exum, "Murder They Wrote," 24.

64 Roth, "The Laws of Eshnunna," 333. Also cf. Laws of Hammurabi §160–161 that similarly requires the father-in-law to give back twofold of what he received if he should choose to repeal the marriage agreement.

65 Saul set the bridewealth at one hundred Philistine foreskins so he should have returned two hundred Philistine foreskins to David (1 Sam 18:25). However, if we follow what the narrator says David actually gave, two hundred Philistine foreskins, then Saul was obligated to give four hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Sam 18:27).

66 Solvang, *A Woman's Place Is in the House*, 89.

Saul was not acting arbitrarily but following cultural customs of the day. The Laws of Eshnunna §29 permit a woman to remarry if her husband is "forcibly displaced" from his home, however if he comes back then she must return to him even if she has had children with the second husband.[67] Additionally, the Laws of Hammurabi §135 clarifies a similar scenario, if such a wife has had children with her second husband they are to stay with their father but she must return to her first husband. The key element in both laws is that the departure of the first husband has left the woman destitute and without provision and this is why she must marry another husband. The Middle Assyrian Laws §45 details a similar scenario but differs in that the woman may only remarry if she has no father-in-law or son and furthermore she must remain alone for two years after which she may get a certificate of widowhood before being free to marry. While there is evidently some development and nuances between the sources, "the fact that the sources are dispersed over a very long period of time and service from different peoples may be evidence that this practice was widely accepted throughout Mesopotamia."[68] For Ben-Barack, Saul is acting not as a father but as a sovereign who must see to it that this custom is followed.[69]

If, however, Michal's provision was really Saul's concern then he could have easily provided her with the resources and wealth that he had. Further, if it was socially unacceptable for a father to provide for his daughter once she had been married, then as a king he could have still provided for her as a "ward of the state." From Saul's past actions in the narrative it is more difficult to believe that his chief motivation for contracting this second marriage is Michal's provision. Saul's primary motivation is the preservation of his social standing and honour. This motivation is why he may want to reframe the scene as David's abandonment of his wife and disloyalty to the king.

Years have passed and Samuel, Saul and Jonathan are dead (1 Sam 31). David has married other wives (1 Sam 27:3). Ish-bosheth, Saul's son, is the King of Israel while David is King of Judah (2 Sam 2:8–10). When Ish-bosheth confronts Abner about sleeping with Saul's concubine Rizpah, Abner gets angry and purposes to help David take over the kingdom of Israel (2 Sam 3:6–11). Before David agrees to any covenant with Abner he demands that Michal, "Saul's daughter," be brought to him (2 Sam 3:13). He then sends the message to Ish-bosheth "Give me my wife Michal, to whom I was betrothed for a hundred

67 Ben-Barak, "The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David," 21–22.

68 Ben-Barak, "The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David," 23.

69 "His action must be recognized as a customary official act and not as the arbitrary act of Saul giving his daughter in marriage"; Ben-Barak, "The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David," 26.

foreskins of the Philistines" (2 Sam 3:14). Ish-bosheth offers no comment, only silent compliance. The sentence "Ish-bosheth sent and took her from a man (מֵעִם אִישׁ), from Paltiel the son of Laish" is odd. Why is Palti not first described as "her man/husband" rather than simply "a man/husband"? The lack of the definite article is odd since he is not just "a man/husband," but Michal's man/husband. It is only the following sentence that emphasises the relationship between them, "but אִישָׁהּ (her man/husband) went with her, weeping as he went, and followed her as far as Bahurim. Then Abner said to him, 'Go! Return!' So he returned" (1 Sam 3:16).

Palti is now just "a man," although his actions clarify that he is "her man" their marriage must be dissolved. Palti must comply with David's demand because while Michal's "second marriage is lawful it is immediately and incontestably invalid upon the return of the first husband," so she must return to David.[70] All of Palti's emotion, the years of marriage to Michal, cannot exempt him from this practise that was binding.

In traditional society a man, even after a long absence, may claim his wife back so far as the wife's family have not returned the *tiri nsa* "head-drink"[71] as sign of marriage dissolution. Although Michal was married to another man at the time it is understandable for the Akan reader that her first husband would ask for her to come back. Even if the second marriage were viewed as an adulterous affair or cohabitation, this would not be a basis for divorce since childlessness is the only major grounds for divorce in Akan traditional marriage. The narrative presents Michal as the contested wife; she is Palti's wife for whom he shows great emotion and David's wife for whom he shows a certain detachment speaking of her both as "my wife" and "Saul's daughter." Michal is the contested wife and in the end David wins the contest.

Michal: The Critical On-Looker (2 Sam 6)

As the king of both Judah and Israel David establishes a new capital, Zion (2 Sam 5:1–9). To complete the establishment of his dynasty David retrieves the ark of God from Abinadab's house (2 Sam 6:1).[72] The ark was not only holy cultic furniture but was believed to be synonymous with Yahweh himself (2 Sam 6:2). David's kingdom must be legitimised not only by political means

70 Ben-Barak, "The Legal Background to the Restoration of Michal to David," 25.

71 *Tiri nsa* is palm-wine alcoholic drink that is given to the bride's family along with the bridewealth and gifts to contract the marriage.

72 Since its capture by and rescue from the Philistines the ark had been kept at Abinadab's house in Kiriath-jearim (1 Sam 7:1–2). This was a period of more than twenty years as it seems to have been there even before Saul is crowned King of Israel.

but also through religious ritual. Additionally, since the ark had been neglected during Saul's reign (1 Chron 13:3), this was also another opportunity for David to make a further distinction between the two dynasties.

The retrieval was an elaborate and communal event. The ark-bearers would walk six steps and stop so that David could offer a sacrifice (2 Sam 6:13). The sovereign מְכַרְכֵּר בְּכָל־עֹז לִפְנֵי יְהוָה "danced with all his might before Yahweh," wearing a linen ephod (2 Sam 6:14).[73] The participle מְכַרְכֵּר occurs only in this narrative (2 Sam 6:14, 16) and may be a sort of circular energetic dance.[74] When Michal sees David מְפַזֵּז "leaping"[75] and dancing "she despised him in her heart" (2 Sam 6:16). Michal's scorning of David "is the complete opposite of the 'love' that she had for David previously."[76] Dancing, accompanied with instruments, was a customary form of jubilation and worship,[77] so what prompted Michal's disdain? David's dance conveys his joy at the acquisition of the ark and the legitimacy that this will bring to his rule. Michal's location at a window, framed her previously as an ally but now as a dissenter (1 Sam 19:12; 2 Sam 6:16).

David is characterised not only as jubilant but also as generous leader when he blesses the people with Yahweh's name[78] and gives food rations to all (2 Sam 6:19). As he returns to bless his own household, Michal comes out to meet him.[79] Her words drip with sarcasm, "how the King of Israel distinguished himself today! He uncovered himself in the eyes of his servants' female-slaves as one of the worthless ones shamelessly uncovers himself" (2 Sam 6:20).

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73 Here David is linked to the Prophet Samuel as well who is described as wearing an ephod before the Lord (1 Sam 2:18). That David is licensed to wear an ephod emphasises his authority in the Levitical order as well as the Monarchy.

74 Wright, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6," 221.

75 The verb מְפַזֵּז occurs only one other time in Gen 49:24 where it has the meaning of agility and flexibility. This is why the verb here in 2 Sam 6:16 is often translated as leaping.

76 Solvang, *A Woman's Place Is in the House*, 110.

77 See Exod 15:20–21; Judg 11:34; 1 Sam 18:6–7; 21:12; 29:5, Ps 149:1–3. Also, dancing was also involved in the worship of other ANE deities (Exod 32:19).

78 Again, David here is shown in his priestly role. The Levites were commissioned by God to recite a formulaic blessing on the Israelites (Num 6:22–26). This recitation was equivalent to placing YHWH's name on his people and would result in God's blessings (Num 6:27). Thus, added to the wearing of the priestly garment, when David blesses the people with the name of the Lord of hosts (2 Sam 6:18) it reiterates his levitical as well as monarchial role.

79 Fokkelman notes that since Michal goes to meet David he is probably still outside the interior of the house and therefore people may be around to hear what she is going to say; Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 198.

This is Michal's second and last speech. Why is she so indignant at the sight of David's behaviour?

Various reasons for Michal's scorn are discusses and the majority of assertions may be categorised as sexual/relational or political. First, a summary of the sexual reasons as to why Michal despises David will be given. Clines asserts that Michal is displeased because "she cannot bear to see the man she has loved flaunt himself as sexually available—presumably, that is, to anyone but her … it proclaims David's indifference in matters of sexual loyalty."[80] Specifically, Michal's irritation could be that the king shamed himself by allowing his servants' female slaves to see his genitals while dancing.[81] Similar to Clines, Fokkelman sees Michal's speech as "a poorly-disguised sign of sexual jealousy."[82] Some suggest that in making this comparison Michal "implicitly … suggested that immoral sexual urges, not zeal for the Lord, had motivated his enthusiastic activities in the festivities of the day."[83] If sexual reasons lie behind Michal's scolding and she is insinuating some sexual indiscretion or vulgarity on David's part then it is not so farfetched that "the consequences strike her at a sexual level" in that she is rendered childless.[84] However, it will be helpful to also look at the political significance of Michal and David's interaction.

Second, and perhaps more pertinent to the narrative, are the political reasons for Michal's disdain. Michal compares David to one of the הָרֵקִים "worthless/empty ones" (2 Sam 6:20 cf. Judg 9:4; 11:3; 2 Chr 13:7). She belittles his biggest feat by insinuating it is vain. Wright proposes that the MT's הָרֵקִים "the worthless/empty ones" be emended to הרקדים "the dancers" so as to correspond with the LXX's translation *των όρχουμένων* "the dancers."[85] In this case Michal would be chiding David for behaving below his rank as monarch. However, it seems that the MT gives Michal's meaning a stronger sense; David's behaviour is beneath a dancer, he is one of the dregs of society, riff-raff. This fits with the narrative context that is about the dissolution of the Saulide dynasty and the consolidation of the Davidic dynasty.[86]

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80 Clines, "The Story of Michal," 138.

81 Rosenstock proposes that David's dance was one in which he exposed his genitals as a way to debase himself and so as not to share in the self-concealing glory of YHWH; Rosenstock, "David's Play," 74–75.

82 Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, 199.

83 Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 333.

84 Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 87.

85 Wright, "Music and Dance in 2 Samuel 6," 217. Also, McCarter, *II Samuel*, 184–85.

86 Seeman, "The Watcher at the Window," 22.

That Michal fails to agree with or honour David's most important religious-political move as of yet places her no longer as loyal to covenant with David but in opposition to him and therefore representative of her father Saul. The ark was not taken care of during Saul's reign, therefore Michal's despising of David's abasement before the ark[87] places her in allegiance with her deceased father and therefore in opposition to David's kingship. It is telling that at this time she is referred to as "Saul's daughter" (2 Sam 6:16, 20).[88] While they may have played a role in Michal's disdain it seems that sexual reasons are secondary to the political. David's response will prioritise political point rather than sexual impropriety. David justifies himself by retorting:

> It was before the Lord, who chose me above your father and above all his house, to appoint me ruler over the people of the Lord, over Israel; therefore I will celebrate before the Lord. I will be more lightly esteemed than this and will be humble in my own eyes, but with the maids of whom you have spoken, with them I will be distinguished.
>
> 2 SAM 6:21–22

Why does David stress his chosen status in answer to Michal's sarcastic chide? His triumph over the Saulide dynasty is at play. It is due to David's multiple escapes from Saul's murderous threats, his subsequent ascension to the throne, as well as his ability to bring the ark to the capital that conjures such ecstasy within him. David has done what Saul could not: attaining national solidarity as well as Yahweh's approval of his rule, symbolised by the residence of the ark.

David contrasts Michal with the female-slaves who will see his actions as honourable. In doing so he reproaches Michal for not having the perspective that even lowly female-slaves have. There is no response from Michal.[89]

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87 Campbell, *2 Samuel*, 70. Campbell makes the connection that the ark is a signal of the installation of David's reign so that "all that Saul stood for is relegated to the unfruitful past."

88 "When used as a symbol to represent their conflicting interests, Michal is referred to as both Saul's daughter and David's wife (1 Sam 18:20, 27, 28; 25:44; 2 Sam 3:13, 14)"; Exum, "Murder They Wrote," 25.

89 Exum asserts that Michal is the victim of a "literary murder" because the narrator does not give her the opportunity to respond to David's speech; Exum, "Murder They Wrote," 19–20.

Michal: Socially Barren

With the close of the narrative comes the bitter notification that Michal "had no child to the day of her death" (2 Sam 6:23). Is Michal's childlessness due to divine punishment, her biological inability or the natural consequence of David refusing to sleep with her again?[90] Some have suggested a causal link between Michal's barrenness and her placement, years earlier, of the *teraphim* in her bed.[91] While the *teraphim* is representative of the syncretistic practises during Saul's reign, Michal uses it to save David's life thereby positively proving her loyalty. It is doubtful then that Michal is being punished for using the *teraphim*. It may be that Michal's response to David's celebration before the ark is tantamount to those who formerly had not displayed a proper attitude to the ark. However, instead of dying or being punished with tumours, Michal is rendered childless (1 Sam 5; 2 Sam 6:6–7 // 1 Chron 13:9–10).[92] While modern readers may be just as uncomfortable with Michal's punishment, as with Uzzah's, the narrator offers ambiguity rather than a concrete rationale.

Michal's snide reference to David as "the king of Israel" may be key to understanding her childlessness within the narrative context. Just as her love is political so the reason for Michal's childlessness is political. "Michal's barrenness has one additional and significant consequence: it ensures that David will father no offspring who could trace their ancestry to Saul's line. The discontinuity between Saul's line and David's is complete; no one of Saulide background can ever lay claim to succession to David's throne."[93] If Yahweh had determined an end to Saul's kingship and a severance of his family line, then by refusing Michal conjugal rights David may have believed he was carrying out a divine determination.

In an Akan context David, though a king, would not have been allowed to deprive Michal of her conjugal rights. She, like all the wives, would have equal rights to produce the princes and princesses of the kingdom. A refusal would have incurred the wrath of the family and a dissolving of the marriage. The situation could also be viewed in another way. The importance of Michal's *mogya*

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90 Alter poses the question, "Is this a punishment from God, or simply a refusal by David to share her bed, or is the latter to be understood as the agency of the former?"; Alter, *The David Story*, 230.

91 Due to its symbolism of fertility; Klein, "Samuel and Kings," 44–45.

92 "It is more likely that the text punishes Michal for her haughty words, which seem to ensure that David will not visit her bed and that Michal's childlessness is her punishment for speaking out against YHWH's anointed."; Klein, "Samuel and Kings," 44.

93 Sakenfeld, *Just Wives?*, 82.

"blood"[94] is further strengthened especially since she is a royal. Her children will belong to her matrilineage and they could develop more loyalty for their maternal Uncle Ish-bosheth than to their father David. Thus, had Michal had children with David they would have been considered more of Saul's family than David's.

From a traditional Akan religious viewpoint, Michal's displeasure at David's dancing and obeisance before the ark would be interpreted as an offence against *Onyankopɔn* (the supreme God). Infertility in this case would be the result of offending the deity. Further, since the first royal wife wielded influence David may have wanted to make an example of her so that his other wives would not think of criticizing religious offerings or rituals offered to deity.

Yet, rather than being a divine punishment[95] Michal's childlessness is likely caused by social not biological or spiritual means. Elsewhere narratives indicate when Yahweh has closed someone's womb,[96] there is no such notice given here. It is a possibility that Michal, in retaliation to David's actions, is the one who does not want to have children with him.[97] Yet it is more likely that "it is David, not Michal's own barrenness, who renders her childless."[98] There is an estrangement between David and Michal from this point onward.[99] There is a deliberate vagueness that may function as a caution for readers to desist from blaming Michal.[100]

The Akan are firm believers that misfortune can be transmitted from one generation to the next. From this traditional perspective Michal's father and brothers have died in a dishonouring ways, by enemy attack and suicide. This reality makes Michal very susceptible to experiencing an unfortunate life as well. Her childlessness then is regarded as emblematic of the unfortunate deaths of her family and the Saulide dynasty.

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94 Blood here does not only refer to the physical fluid but is a kinship term that refers to the mother's bond with her children and the way that lineage is determined through the mother's line.

95 Exum inquires in this vein "that the text is not explicit, however, renders Michal's childless plight more poignant in that we cannot specifically locate its cause … Or since it is YHWH who opens and closes the womb (Gen 20:18; 29:31; 30:2, 22; 1 Sam 1:5, 6; Isa 66:9), does the textual reticence point to the deity?"; Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 88.

96 Cf. Gen 20:18 and 1 Sam 1:5, 6. White, "Michal the Misinterpreted," 463.

97 Klein, "Samuel and Kings," 44.

98 Klein, "Samuel and Kings," 44.

99 Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 25.

100 White, "Michal the Misinterpreted," 462.

Conclusion to Michal: The Estranged Wife

David takes Michal's scorn seriously to the point of depriving her of conjugal rights. The installation of the ark in Jerusalem is not an unimportant ritual but a celebration of YHWH's residence in the new capital and legitimation of David's dynasty. As such the queen must show due deference.

Unlike Uzzah's death, it is not explicit that YHWH is the instigator of Michal's childlessness. Rather, it is David's anger at Michal's scorn that brings about the cessation of marital relations from that day forward. Estranged from her husband, Michal was unable to have children with him. Unlike Leah, Michal's conjugal ban does not appear to have been lifted. Michal is taken from a husband who is affectionately attached to her and perhaps this is what precipitates her irritation. For her scornful speech to David, and indirectly her show of disloyalty to his dynasty, Michal is sentenced to a life of social barrenness.

Michal's characterisation at the beginning of her narrative is in stark contrast to her characterisation as she exits the narrative stage. Still, maybe Michal's contrast is not so strange because if she is her father's daughter, then she mirrors Saul who loved David but despised him to the end. Both Michal and Leah are the first wives of their husbands. Both Michal and Leah are daughters of fathers who use them for their own political or personal ends. However, Leah is barren for a time, while Michal is rendered childless for a lifetime. She never becomes a wom(b)an.

CHAPTER 7

Dinah and Princess Tamar: Violated Women

Oral traditions and history books are replete with battles and conquests. Yet, these accounts focus primarily on the injuries and wounds sustained by men. The stories of men who have lost limb and life overshadow the accounts of the innumerable women whose bodies and lives have been ravaged and pillaged. Violated women have been wounded, widowed, raped, captured and rendered childless, often the unacknowledged casualties of individual desire and national expansion. Dinah and Princess Tamar's sexual violations are caused by individual desire that becomes a violent turning point in the history of their families and nations. The historical accounts of their fathers, and brothers, largely focus on male loss and male grief rather than the desolate women in the wake of male lust.

The narratives of Dinah (Gen 34) and Princess Tamar (2 Sam 13) will be examined. These two women, both the only named daughters of their fathers, are sexually violated by princes. In the ANE context, rape had the ability to render them unmarriageable—except to their perpetrator. Dinah and Tamar, after their trauma, both disappear from the narrative scene. Both women are frozen in time, unable to move through marriage onto the ultimate life-passage. Dinah and Tamar are rendered socially barren because, as sexually violated women their marriage opportunity is diminished and they are rendered childless.

Dinah's Narrative

Dinah's narrative is the first of three in-depth stories concerning Jacob's children (Dinah, Judah and Joseph).[1] Yet, Dinah is first introduced as "the daughter of Leah" (Gen 34:1). The mention of Leah foreshadows the unfortunate circumstance that Dinah is about to endure as her narrative unfolds. Of the

1 Genesis 38 tells the story of Judah. Genesis 37–50 is dedicated to Joseph. Simeon and Levi and the other sons are minor characters in relation to the priority given to the other children in the previously mentioned narratives. Furthermore, "while this story might seem at first sight to be an interlude in the patriarchal story, it contains the three major elements of Abrahamic blessing." The three major elements are then described: the promise of becoming a great nation, the promise of the land and the call to be a blessing; Turner, *Genesis*, 151.

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three narratives following Jacob's children, Dinah's is the only one in which the main character's voice is omitted. Dinah is a flat character that is silent and passive. The tragedy of Dinah's narrative is linked to the male characters that serve their own interests.[2] Furthermore, Dinah's greatest trauma is that after Shechem's violation she remains unmarried and therefore childless. In the ANE context the childless disposition of a woman was an added tragedy to her rape. The connection between Dinah's sexual violation and her social barrenness will be further explored. Due to her rape, Dinah does not become a wom(b)an; she is never mentioned within the *tôlĕdôt* again.

Dinah's narrative commences in Gen 33:18 and ends in Gen 35:1–7. The narrative begins and ends with Jacob coming to a new location and erecting an altar to Yahweh. When we start the narrative from Gen 33:18 instead of Gen 34:1 we get the sense of irony that the narrator intends. The narrator states that Jacob and his family arrived "peacefully" at the Canaanite city of Shechem (Gen 33:18).[3] As the narrative unfolds we find out that this city, and the activities that happen therein, are not at all peaceful.[4]

The Sexual Violation

It is no coincidence that Dinah is identified as the daughter of Leah[5] "the one she bore to Jacob" (Gen 34:1). Dinah's first description is that she is her mother's daughter. Like mother, like daughter; Dinah will be treated with a similar apathy like her mother has endured. It may not be far-fetched to speculate that Dinah is unloved like her mother.[6] Dinah's name (from the root דִּין) carries the

2 Shechem because he violates her; her brothers because it is not too clear how much of their actions are actually done to protect her; and her father Jacob because he is disturbingly silent in regards to her ordeal.

3 Whether שָׁלֵם should be translated as a noun, that is the name of a town, or as an adjective is debated. I have translated it as an adjective since there is no other reference to a Hivite city called שָׁלֵם. Also, when Abraham arrives at Shechem earlier in Gen 12 there is no mention of a place called Shalem in, or near, the city of Shechem. However, from the Septuagint to Claus Westermann there has been a tradition of interpreting this as a place Salem, near Shechem; Alter, *Genesis*, 187.

4 "There is more than a touch of irony in this adjective, for he certainly did not leave it in that state"; Gibson, *Genesis*, 213.

5 Parry insightfully comments, "Jacob's lack of love for Leah is the background for his lack of concern for Dinah (contrast his later attitude to the loss if his favorite wife's son, Joseph). This tension also explains the overreaction of Dinah's full brothers"; Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, 130.

6 Apparently, Jacob favours Joseph and Benjamin more because they are Rachel's children. Even the notice in Gen 37:3 that Jacob loved Joseph because he was born in his old age is curious since Dinah may not be that much older or younger than Joseph.

connotation of justice and judgment.[7] The irony of Dinah's story is that there is no justice for her, only silence, shame and social barrenness.

Dinah, in search of companionship, goes out[8] to see the daughters of the land but instead Shechem sees her and consequently misfortune occurs (Gen 34:2).[9] The succession of verbs attributed to Shechem shows the speed and intensity of the actions.[10] "Then he saw (וַיַּרְא) her … and then he took (וַיִּקַּח) her, and then he had sexual intercourse (וַיִּשְׁכַּב) with her, therefore he humbled her (וַיְעַנֶּהָ)" (Gen 34:2). The verb וַיְעַנֶּהָ "therefore he humbled her" has been the source of much scholarly debate as to whether it should be understood as rape. This is primarily due to the subsequent verses that seem to describe Shechem's love for Dinah.[11] For Wyatt, the vocabulary does not suggest "that the encounter is a violent one."[12] In the same vein, Bechtel offers that Dinah was not raped but willingly succumbed to Shechem's seduction.[13] Wolde does not believe that וַיְעַנֶּהָ denotes rape but "is an evaluative term used in a judicial context which marks a debasement of the social status of a woman with effects on the debasement of the men related to her."[14]

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7 Dinah's name, the female form of Dan, is possibly Leah's final retort to Rachel whose servant Bilhah gives birth to Dan because she said that God has vindicated her (Gen 30:5–6).

8 Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 588–89. This narrative is propelled by the use of the key verb יָצָא (34:1, 6, 24, 26). All the "going out" of the characters seem innocent (Dinah, Hamor and the ones going out of the city) except the brothers who plunder the city, take captives and abscond with their sister.

9 Bader adds that in the greater Genesis narrative "a woman being seen by a foreign ruler did not bode well for the woman. We can marshal the wife-sister incidents in Genesis 12, 20, and 26 as evidence for this statement"; Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 91. However, it is not only women at times that are endangered by their going out. Later, Judah will also bring complications and disaster on himself when he has sexual relationships with two women of the land. "In some cases, apparently, it is just as dangerous for biblical men to venture beyond their thresholds as it is for young daughters"; Seeman, "'Where Is Sarah Your Wife?'," 122.

10 It has been observed that "as a characteristic feature of Semitic languages, a combination of three verbs describes the rapid-fire action of the rape. Attached to three pronouns, they underscore the increasing severity of the violence"; Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 165–66. Also, Sarna makes the point that the succession of the verbs show the increase in violence or force; Sarna, *Genesis*, 233.

11 "Unlike other occasions when rape leads to repulsion (2 Sam 13:10–15), here Shechem's love increases and he persuades his father to make a proposal of friendship to Jacob (34:9–10)"; McKeown, *Genesis*, 158.

12 Wyatt, "The Story of Dinah and Shechem," 436.

13 Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)," 32.

14 Wolde, "Does 'Innâ Denote Rape?," 537.

For Lipka and Bechtel, it is not so much the verbal construction of the narrative but social custom that leads them to propose that this not as a rape scene. Lipka argues that Dinah's experience "is about the social wrong done to a young woman's family when a man has intercourse with her out of wedlock and how each of the parties involved responds to this wrong."[15] Additionally, Bechtel's counter-reading is that since Dinah shamed her family, in that she deviated from the boundaries set by the family group, Jacob's sons are obliged to defend the honour of the group and eradicate the shame brought upon them.[16] Further, Steinberg advances that Gen 34 is about illicit sex and explains why Israelite women should not marry foreigners, because exogamous marriages only lead to family division and trouble.[17]

A very helpful contribution from the above counter-readings is the importance of understanding what illegitimate sex is in the ANE context. In the Hebrew, and larger ANE context, the issue is not so much one of consensual sex as it is about legitimate sex. That is to say that part of Shechem's violation is that he has slept with a young woman for whom he has not performed any customary betrothal or marriage rite. However, some of these interpretations then assume that it must be the taking of "Dinah's virginity out of wedlock rather than an act of sexual coercion that causes such a strong reaction from Dinah's male guardians."[18] However, underscoring the Hebrew Bible's concern with illegitimate sex does not necessarily negate a rape interpretation here.

Additionally, scholars who counter the rape interpretation do so on the basis of the meanings of the verbs in isolation. Yet, it is the combination and close succession of the verbs וַיִּקַּח and וַיִּשְׁכַּב that cannot be ignored;[19] this is not a lovers' rendezvous but a rape.[20] Additionally, as if the three verbs together are

15 Lipka, *Sexual Transgression in the Hebrew Bible*, 184.

16 Bechtel, "What If Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34)," 32.

17 Dinah's narrative is a counterpart of Esau's marriage to foreign women and so the two parts emphasise the nuisance of not having "appropriate spouses"; Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 109–10.

18 Lipka, *Sexual Transgression in the Hebrew Bible*, 190.

19 Scholz believes that it is the combination of verbs that indicates rape; Scholz, *Rape Plots*, 138. Also, Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 513.

20 Noble argues that וַיִּשְׁכַּב followed by the direct object marker אֹתָהּ and not the preposition עִם suggests that this is already a negative connotation and also a violent one because of verb that precedes and follows it. These negative contexts are incest, having intercourse with a woman who is menstruating, homosexual relations and adultery; Noble, "A 'Balanced' Reading of the Rape of Dinah," 178. See also, Alter, *Genesis*, 189. Noting that these same verbs appear in 2 Sam 11:4 and 2 Sam 12:11, Davidson has argued that David's sexual encounter with Bathsheba is rape. "The string of verbs in this narrative sequence

not enough to clarify the situation "the narrator uses the verb וַיְעַנֶּהָ (he dishonoured her) to evaluate what Shechem did when he slept with Dinah. From the narrator, the reader first learns that something inappropriate had taken place. "'Legitimate' sexual intercourse did not dishonour a woman."[21] Shechem's act is "a triple-layered crime" because Shechem is a foreigner, a rapist, and his victim is an unmarried young woman.[22] The violation of Dinah's sexuality places her in the company of others in the Genesis ancestral narratives.[23]

According to Torah, if a betrothed woman was raped in the field she would bear no culpability since it is imagined that she would have tried to call for help but no one came to her rescue. In such a case her rapist would be sentenced to death (Deut 22:25–27).

A man who raped a virgin was compelled to marry her and pay the father fifty shekels of silver, he was forbidden from ever divorcing this wife (Deut 22:28–29). The fifty shekels of silver was a combination of a bridewealth and compensation. The father could refuse to give his daughter in marriage but the man would still have to pay the bridewealth (Exod 22:16–17). Rape was regarded not only as a crime against a family but, in some cases, the community (cf. Judg 20).[24]

Other ANE laws were more exacting. According to the Middle Assyrian Laws §55 if a married man raped a virgin then her father was permitted to take the man's wife and allow her to be raped by someone else.[25] If unmarried, the rapist would have to compensate the father with three times the

('saw … sent … inquired … sent … took her … lay with her') indicates that it is David's initiative throughout, not Bathsheba's"; Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 527.

21 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 91.

22 Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, 146.

23 There are the wife-sister narratives of Abraham and Isaac in which the sexual purity of the wives are jeopardized because the husbands want to save their own lives (Gen 12:1–20; 20:1–18; 26:6–11). There is the attempted rape of the angelic guests of Lot (Gen 19:1–11). Then, there is the case where Lot's daughters have sex with him while he is intoxicated (Gen 19:30–38). Next, the story is told of Reuben's affair with his father's concubine Bilhah (Gen 35:22). Judah sleeps with Tamar because he thinks she is a prostitute (Gen 38). Joseph is also the victim of sexual harassment by Potiphar's wife and finally when she can take no more of his rejection she cries "rape" (Gen 39:7–18). Dinah's narrative, then, is but a microcosm, of sexual exploitation in the ancestral narratives, which are in contrast with the edenic one-flesh sexual union (Gen 2:24).

24 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 75. Bader cites Judg 20 and Deut 22:25–27 as examples of rape being taken up as a public crime.

25 Roth, "The Middle Assyrian Laws," 359. Interestingly, the treatment of a man who raped a married woman was more severe; he would be killed according to Middle Assyrian Laws §12.

value of the current bridewealth. Still, the father could refuse to allow him to marry his daughter and he could contract another marriage for her.[26] Even in the scenario where a man swore that the young woman had consensual sex with him, he was still bound to pay thrice the bridewealth and the father could then punish the daughter as he willed.[27]

Laws of Eshnunna §26 describe what happens to men who sleep with young women without paying their bridewealth: if the young lady is betrothed then the one who slept with her must be killed.[28] In the case of a female slave who is not betrothed, the man will be fined twenty shekels of silver.[29]

There is some evidence to suggest that marriages contracted in the aftermath of rape were regarded in a different light. Middle Assyrian Laws §55 shows that the girl is not given "'as a wife' (*kî aššati*) but 'in a marriage-like relationship (*kî ahuzzete*).'"[30] If indeed this marriage was seen as "less-than" it would further motivate families to keep their daughters from entering into this arrangement.

In the ANE context the real crime of rape was that of "property damage, economic loss to the father because of the diminished value of his no longer virgin daughter for sale into marriage."[31] The fathers could punish their daughters or husbands could punish their wives if they were raped. "Women victims of forcible rape were punished for having been raped, making them twice victims."[32]

Shechem not only commits a sexual violation but also breaches the hospitality code. Jacob buys the land near Shechem for one hundred קְשִׂיטָה, an unknown monetary value. As owners of the land on the boundary of the city, Jacob and his family were to be protected by Shechem the prince of the city. Instead Shechem abuses Dinah and violates the code of hospitality.

Disturbingly, the narrator reports that Shechem clung to Dinah with his whole self (Gen 34:3). The root of וַתִּדְבַּק is used elsewhere to denote a man leaving his parents and "clinging" to his wife in order that they might be one flesh (Gen 2:24). The rapist is not repulsed after violating his victim.[33] Shechem clings to Dinah because he "loved" her; he tries to speak "to her heart"

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26 Roth, "The Middle Assyrian Laws," 359.

27 Middle Assyrian Laws §56 Roth, "The Middle Assyrian Laws," 360.

28 Roth, "The Laws of Eshnunna," 333.

29 Laws of Eshnunna §31; Roth, "The Laws of Eshnunna," 334.

30 Démare-Lafont, "Inheritance Law of and through Women in the Middle Assyrian Period," 8–9.

31 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 131.

32 Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment*, 132.

33 "The psychology of this rapist is precisely the opposite of Amnon's in 2 Sam 13, who, after having consummated his lust for his sister by raping her, despises her. Here, the fulfilment

(Gen 34:3). The narrative portrays "how differently Shechem understands the circumstances; his experience of the sexual liaison sounds markedly different from the narrator's evaluation. There is no hint of dishonour, violation, shame, or wrongdoing; from Shechem's point of view, unity, love, and bonding are portrayed."[34]

The notice of Shechem's "love" leads some scholars to argue against a rape context. In these counter-readings, Shechem's latter feelings are prioritised over his initial violation. Interpreters allow the latter love to define the nature of the sexual interaction rather than allowing the sexual interaction to define the nature of the love. Extant ancient sources reveal that in certain instances all a man had to do to avoid, or lessen the gravity of, the penalty was to claim that the woman had consented to sexual relations.[35] In Shechem's speech, however, there is no attempt to acknowledge guilt or place the blame on Dinah. His silence regarding the consequences of his actions are telling. Shechem's violation cannot be erased and his taking of Dinah before he asks for her hand in marriage,[36] is an implicit hint that his love should be called into question.[37]

The Marriage Proposal

Shechem approaches his father and demands: קַח־לִי "take for me," that is that Hamor should arrange for his marriage to "this girl" Dinah (Gen 34:4). Interestingly, the narrator identifies Dinah as הַנַּעֲרָ "the young woman," whereas Shechem refers to her as הַיַּלְדָּה "girl" (Gen 34:3, 4).[38] The fact that Shechem

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of the impulse of unrestrained desire is followed by love, which complicates the moral balance of the story"; Alter, *Genesis*, 190.

34 Here Bader, drawing on focalization theory from Mieke Bal, proposes that Shechem, not the narrator, is the "focalizor," that is "the point from which the elements are viewed"; Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 92. *Contra*, Scholz who argues that this phrase simply means that Shechem was in close proximity to Dinah so וַתִּדְבַּק נַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בַּת־יַעֲקֹב "describes clearly the sexually objectifying dimension of Shechem's motives … 'His desire remained close to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob'"; Scholz, "Through Whose Eyes?," 169.

35 Middle Assyrian Laws §56; Roth, "The Middle Assyrian Laws," 360.

36 Davidson makes the point that as opposed to Gen 2:24 "here the cleaving comes after sexual intercourse but outside the marriage covenant"; Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 515.

37 Scholz argues that אָהֵב should be interpreted within its context and not merely assumed to mean "mutual intimacy"; Scholz, "Through Whose Eyes?," 170.

38 The word נַעֲרָה is used to describe young women of marriageable age. The only exception seems to be Naaman's servant who is described as נַעֲרָה קְטַנָּה here the adjective modifying the noun indicates that she is a little girl (2 Kgs 5:2).

envisions Dinah to be a young girl may suggest that there is a noticeable age difference between the two.[39] Or since he later refers to Dinah as הַנַּעֲרָ "the young woman," when making his plea to Jacob and his sons (Gen 34:12), this may suggest that Shechem knows Dinah is of marriageable age thus referring to her as a "girl" is intentionally belittling.

Shechem is the opposite of Dinah, he is an active and dynamic character in the narrative—he sees and he takes. He demands the girl from his father and consequently Hamor begins negotiations with Jacob and sons. Shechem's tone indicates that he is a prince who is accustomed to desiring something, possessing it and delaying the consequences until later.[40]

Jacob's role in Dinah's narrative is concerning. In the narrative past Jacob has been an active character playing the role of a trickster to attain the firstborn's blessing; as a man in love who indentures himself for fourteen years for the woman of his choice; as a shrewd business man who is able to outwit Laban and make a sizeable profit; and as a man who wrestles with God. Jacob "seems strangely flat, especially considering the life-changing transformation that he supposedly underwent in the previous chapter."[41] In Dinah's story Jacob is almost absent. Yet, Dinah is "the daughter of Leah" and when read through the lens of her mother's experience Jacob's nonchalant approach is not as surprising. Still an Akan person believes that since marriage is the union between two families, rather than two individuals, it is the matrilineage's responsibility to see to their daughter's wellbeing. Thus, from the Akan perspective not only has Jacob failed in his fatherly duty but so too have Leah and Rachel.[42] Dinah's two mothers are completely absent from the sequence of events.

When Jacob hears that Dinah has been defiled he does not say anything because "his sons were with his cattle in the field" (Gen 34:5). Perhaps Jacob is concerned about interrupting their productivity, or since the field is closer to where Shechem is he may want to prevent them from charging over there immediately. It is not clear how Jacob finds out about Dinah's defilement before her brothers do. Neither does the narrator present the specific

39 The word יַלְדָּה occurs in only two other places in which it refers to girls who are likely too young for marriage. Joel 3:3 describes a young boy being traded for a harlot's service while a young girl is traded for a drink of wine. Zechariah 8:5 depicts little girls playing in the streets.

40 In this sense Shechem is similar to Samson whose eyes also lead him into trouble (Judg 14:1; 16:1). Samson's sight, and subsequent actions, is given ironic emphasis when the Philistines gouge out his eyes (Judg 16:21).

41 Cotter, *Genesis*, 255.

42 In Akan custom your mother's younger sister is called *maame ketewa* (little/younger mother) and plays an important junior-mother role.

reason why Jacob believes Dinah is defiled. Bader offers that "there are a few possibilities—maybe intercourse, in and of itself, defiled a woman; Shechem was a Hivite and his lying with Dinah defiled her; or the defilement resulted because Dinah had not been properly given to Shechem."[43] Alternatively, Olyan offers another possibility, namely, that Shechem's foreskin is the "disgraceful thing" that causes long-term pollution to Dinah.[44] Whichever option one decides to champion, the fact still remains: the only daughter of Jacob has been sexually violated, is possibly cohabiting with Shechem against her wishes and Jacob's response to the situation is silence. Ironically, it is here in v. 5 that Dinah is referred to as Jacob's daughter in contrast to v. 1 in which she is Leah's daughter. For unspecified reasons Jacob chooses to wait for his sons in order to deal with the matter of his daughter's defilement.

Hamor, in response to his son's demand for Dinah, goes out in order to speak to Jacob (Gen 34:6). For the second time in the narrative the verb וַיֵּצֵא is used. The first time it is used to describe Dinah's journey to visit the daughters of the land. In this narrative it is not farfetched to see וַיֵּצֵא as a signal for an action that will have far reaching consequences.

While Hamor has begun his proposal, Jacob's sons come in from the field (Gen 34:7). The brothers are outraged and infuriated because of the "foolishness,"[45] that is, that someone should have illegitimate sexual intercourse with Dinah. The narrator's note that the "foolishness" should not be done in Israel is further indictment of Shechem's actions. Shechem is not in love, he is into foolishness.

Hamor is contrasted with his son Shechem. As he speaks with Jacob he uses the particle of entreaty before urging Jacob and his sons to do anything (Gen 34:8–10). Shechem's entire being desires Dinah and this is the reason why Hamor takes the risk of beginning marriage negotiations with Jacob and his

43 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 93.

44 Olyan, *Rites and Rank*, 65. Olyan does not rule out the possibility that the defilement or pollution may simply be the outcome of any prohibited sexual activity.

45 Another option is to translate "disgraceful nonsense." The word נְבָלָה occurs thirteen times Shechem's action (Gen 34:7); Achan's act of taking things under the ban (Josh 7:15); describing the intended gang-rape of a male visitor (Judg 19:23–24); the actual gang-rape of the Levite's concubine (Judg 20:6, 10); Tamar describes her own rape in this way (2 Sam 13:12); a fool's speech or foolish speech (Isa 9:17; 32:6); adultery with neighbours' wives (Jer 29:23); the act of a girl discovered not to be a virgin while residing in her father's house (Deut 22:21); Abigail describes Nabal, her husband, in this way (1 Sam 25:25); and Yahweh describes the Job's friends' speech as this in contrast to Job's speech (Job 42:8). As can be seen most of the usage denotes deviant or illicit sexual behaviour and provides further support for a rape interpretation of Gen 34.

sons. Hamor's request seems authentic yet almost desperate. He requests not only that Shechem be allowed to marry Dinah but also that there will be openness to intermarriage between his clan and Jacob's clan.

It is interesting that Hamor's proposal of intermarriage between his townspeople and Jacob's sons, can be linked to a similar practise in traditional Akan society. The *ayetɛ* "replacement marriage" was a marriage that happened when a clan would move to a new area and ask for permanent residency.[46] The chief would marry one of the women from the clan. "This would be agreed upon and from that day marriage agreements would be laid down between the chief and the immigrants so that the occupant of the stool would always have a wife from the settler group."[47] Further, the *ayetɛ* marriage was a way to ensure integration and loyalty between the two groups of people.

The offer of permanent residence in the land of Shechem (emphasized by the verbs וְהֶאָחֲזוּ, וּסְחָרוּהָ תֵּשְׁבוּ)[48] is perhaps intended to appease and further encourage the acceptance of Shechem as the son-in-law of Jacob (Gen 34:10). Though seemingly generous in Hamor's eyes, the proposal was probably an affront to Jacob and his sons since Yahweh's promise was that they would be owners of all the land not just permanent residents of some of it.[49]

Hamor has offered all that he can as a father and his speech ends. He has used imperatives, particles of entreaty and offered the best of the land to Jacob and his family. It should be noted that Jacob does not actually agree to Hamor's marriage proposal. He is silent. Is he taking time to mull over the proposal before consenting, or is his silence a rejection of the proposal?

Shechem takes over the marriage negotiations and begins to speak to "her" father and brothers (Gen 34:11). The prince volunteers to pay the highest price if only he can wed Dinah. The מֹהַר was a bridewealth[50] given to the bride's

46 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 25.

47 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 25.

48 This offer to dwell, go around, and take possession in the land (Gen 34:10) is a little odd since Jacob has already purchased land and his sons evidently are shepherding around the area. "Could this be a subtle threat?" from Hamor reminding Jacob that his fate in the land is precarious?; Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 268.

49 Arnold, *Genesis*, 297. "Thus Hamor's proposal would have made Jacob's family permanent residents, who hoped slowly to acquire portions of the land, rather than transhumant pastoralists living in the expectation that their descendants would some day be the rightful and sole inhabitants of the land."

50 This word occurs only three times in the Hebrew Bible: Gen 34:12, Exod 22:16 and 1 Sam 18:25. "In origin, very probably regarded as an economic recompense for the loss of a worker within the household, as young girls of marriageable age contributed by taking care of flocks and herds, reaping, weaving, and so on"; Scullion, *Genesis*, 242.

father. It seems that the מֹהַר was to be paid regardless of whether or not the young woman was a virgin.[51] Therefore, Shechem's proposal of the מֹהַר is not what makes his speech strange. Rather, it is Shechem's offer to give an additional מַתָּן "gift," that is interesting (Gen 34:12). The מַתָּן does not appear to be a part of marriage contracts.[52] In Shechem's opinion, then, this may be a kind of compensatory gift that he feels he needs to give in order for his request to be granted.[53] Whether or not the מַתָּן should be taken as Shechem's profession of his guilt is unclear. Other than this hint, Shechem offers no admission of impropriety on his part.

The Brothers' Deception

The brothers answer with deception. There is wordplay between וַיְעַנֶּהָ (he humbled her, Gen 34:2) and וַיַּעֲנוּ (they answered, Gen 34:13).[54] The narrator gives a clue that the answer given by Jacob's sons will be one that will result in the humiliation of Shechem and his family. Dinah's defilement by Shechem is the motive for the deception that Jacob's sons are plotting. Here, as in the previous verse in which Jacob finds out that Dinah has been defiled, it is not clear whether he views her defilement as being involved in a sexual encounter, the fact that Shechem is a Hivite or that she has been treated in a sexually abusive manner.

In Akan culture rape is not only an offence against the victim but also against her family. This is because marriage is seen as a matter between two families, not two individuals, therefore a man who bypasses a woman's family and has sex with her without performing the marriage rites is viewed with

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51 In Exod 22:16–17 we see that the מֹהַר must be paid by the man who rapes a virgin. "If a man deceives (יְפַתֶּה) a virgin who he is not betrothed to and he has sexual intercourse with her he will surely pay compensation in order for her to be his wife. However, if her father adamantly refuses to give her to him he shall weigh out silver according to the compensation payment of virgins."

52 In its usage מַתָּן refers to a cultic offering (Num 18:11) or generally to presents (Prov 18:16; 19:6; 21:14). It is not used in any marriage contexts. The LXX uses only one word *phernē* "dowry" and so it is thought that מַתָּן is a gloss for מֹהַר. "If this was not the case, however, and if two separate gifts were envisioned, then this text may in fact point to a marriage custom, or a variant in marriage custom, that actually existed in ancient Israel"; Lemos, *Marriage Gifts and Social Change in Ancient Palestine*, 44.

53 The gift may have been a personal gift for Dinah; Mendelsohn, "The Family in the Ancient Near East," 29. *Contra* Hamilton who believes that מֹהַר וּמַתָּן is a hendiadys meaning "bridal price," and that it is unlikely that this is "a gift to the bride"; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 361.

54 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 98.

contempt. As in the ANE and Hebrew legal material, the Akan culture also metes out harsher punishment for men who rape married women. The rape of a married woman is an offense that is "punished by the state."[55] The severe public penalty was to serve as a warning for others.[56] In the case where a royal wife or daughter was the victim the man would be killed, and even possibly his mother and father would also be killed.[57]

Within the Akan cultural context, the cases of unmarried women are treated differently. Justice is sought by the young woman's parents in the form of monetary compensation, public discipline and shaming of the rapist and his family. The mediation of the community elders would mean that the case would not necessarily need to be adjudicated at the palace. In Akan culture, Dinah is entitled to receiving justice so that she could recover from her trauma and perhaps one day have a healthy marriage and wom(b)anhood.

Dinah's brothers demand the circumcision of Shechem and the men of the city as a prerequisite to the marriage. This request may highlight their resentment that Shechem is a foreigner who has dared to defile their sister with his uncircumcised penis. Their speech suggests that they are "concerned with honour and following codes."[58] Furthermore, their threat to take their "daughter and go" if their requirements aren't met is telling (Gen 34:17). The brothers have assumed Jacob's patriarchal role of contracting or denying a marriage contract.[59] In contrast to the HB's legislation, it is unlikely in Akan culture that parents would consent to their daughter marrying the man who raped her. The Akan reader wonders why the people of Shechem do not discern the deception. It is because they may be aware of customary or legal precedence permitting a young woman to be married to her rapist.

The role of the brothers in the marriage of their sisters is significant in traditional cultures. In Akan society, the groom honours the bride's brothers when he gives the *akontagye sekan*, the monetary gift to appreciate their protection of their sister. Due to the matrilineal system it is not only a bride's full brothers that can claim this monetary compensation but also her male first-cousins from her mother's side.[60] They may claim that they have not been adequately

55 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 48.

56 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 47.

57 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 47.

58 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 99.

59 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 99. This involvement in marriage negotiation is also seen in Laban's role in Rebekah's marriage (Gen 24:29–59).

60 In Akan, there is no such thing as first-cousins. A person's first-cousins (especially from their maternal side) are referred to as brothers and sisters.

compensated. If the brothers do not approve of the groom they can delay the marriage process by asking for more monetary gifts than previously agreed. Since the couple are not officially regarded as married until all the bridewealth and gifts are accepted, it is in the best interest of the groom to befriend his brothers-in-law and satisfy them with gifts.

After hearing the brothers' ultimatum, "their words seemed good in the eyes of" Hamor and Shechem (Gen 34:18). This is an ironic statement since it is Shechem's eyes that brought about this whole situation and yet his eyes are unable to see the imminent danger. It appears that Shechem knows the influence that he has, "also he was honoured above his father's entire house," and perhaps this is what he relies on the most (Gen 34:19).

Now that Hamor and Shechem agree they must convince the rest of the townsmen to be circumcised. The father and son appeal to the Shechemites by indicating that if they are circumcised they stand to gain economically. They anticipate being able to weaken the foreigners and eventually, likely through exploitative ways, acquire the possessions and resources of Jacob and his family (Gen 34:23). Hamor relies on his perception that Jacob and his sons are peaceful (Gen 34:21).

On the third day Simeon and Levi come into the city בֶּטַח "discretely" (Gen 34:25). This is an interesting heightening of irony since the brothers' discrete entry into the city is in contrast with Jacob's שָׁלֵם peaceful entry to Shechem and also the description of Jacob and his sons given by Hamor to the city dwellers.[61] In the mass murder of the circumcised Shechemites, "Simeon and Levi, Dinah's full brothers, act with gross excess. The slaughter reaches far beyond any reasonable retaliation.... The city shares in the guilt of Shechem."[62] The brothers' deception is evocative of the role of deception in other Genesis narratives.[63] The brothers abuse circumcision, previously a sign

61 Turner, *Genesis*, 147. There is nothing peace-inducing about Jacob's silence or the brothers' plans (Gen 34:21).

62 Scullion, *Genesis*, 241. Also, it is logical that the prince of the story, Shechem, would have been named after the city Shechem; Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, 135. Perhaps this is a hint that Shechem's actions as an individual may be reflective of the attitudes and actions of the inhabitants.

63 Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 78. Examples of prominent deception threads: Jacob deceives Isaac and later is deceived by Laban to marry Leah. Judah deceives Tamar by not telling her when his youngest son is old enough to marry her and in the end she deceives him. For a comprehensive study into this theme see, Williams, *Deception in Genesis*. Also, Turner agrees that the two motifs of deception and conflict that are present in Dinah's narrative are also largely featured in the narratives of Jacob; Turner, *Genesis*, 147–49.

of the Abrahamic covenant, and use it to bring death rather than inclusion into the community.

The remaining brothers raid the city and take captive the women and children (Gen 34:27–29). Dinah's brothers now capture the daughters of the land whom she originally went out to see. Jacob, angry and in fear of his life and the lives of his household, rebukes his sons for their actions (Gen 34:30). This rebuke is his first speech in the narrative, and Jacob shows more concern for community relations than Dinah's treatment.

Jacob, aware of his position as a nomad and sojourner, is also concerned about his status in the land. Traditionally, many undocumented persons, people with differing immigration status in foreign countries and people of lower socio-economic means have been urged to ignore or endure sexual violation because dependents or other family members and friends are worried about how this will impact immigration status.

The brothers respond with a question "should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" Supposedly, the brothers are more concerned with their sister Dinah's honour and not the relations with the surrounding communities. They seem unconcerned with the danger that is possibly looming because of their massacre at Shechem.

Hamor and Shechem "focus on the economic benefits of an alliance" while Dinah's brothers focus on the violation of their sister.[64] The brothers' open-ended question reflects the senselessness of the rape and the supposed reason for the mass murder; הַכְזוֹנָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־אֲחוֹתֵנוּ "should he make our sister like a harlot?" (Gen 34:31). This question may have an economic concern underlying it. In their inability to acknowledge the violation that has taken place, Shechem and Hamor have trivialised their marriage request. It may have been customary for a man who raped a non-betrothed woman to marry her if the prospective father-in-law agreed and a penalty (compensation plus bride-wealth) was paid (cf. Exod 22:16–17). Shechem tells Jacob and the brothers to name their price. The prince will give them whatever they ask (Gen 34:11–12). Yet Shechem's price is still too low in the brothers' estimation. No amount of money can pacify the brothers' fury. Shechem will discover that death, not money, will be the required penalty for his actions.

The prince's apparent magnanimity actually makes light of the rape because he speaks primarily in terms of bridewealth and not "compensation or restitution."[65] The price, "ask for anything you want," is too low because there is no penalty involved.

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64 Vrolijk, *Jacob's Wealth*, 268–69.

65 Noble, "A 'Balanced' Reading of the Rape of Dinah," 194.

Hamor and Shechem offer the rights of intermarriage, permanent residency, freedom of trade and money (Gen 34:9–10). Yet all of these things are of personal cost to Hamor and Shechem except the ambiguous price that Shechem volunteers. For instance, free access in their land (part of which Jacob has already paid for!) concerns the community more than it costs this father and son. Shechem's personal detachment and the lack of remorse for violating their sister motivate the brothers to demand circumcision as a condition. Hamor and Shechem offer currency, residency and economic alliance but the brothers will accept nothing but blood.

Yahweh finally speaks but he does not address the tragedies at Shechem directly (Gen 35:1–7). Instead he calls for Jacob to leave Shechem and go to Bethel, to "The Place," and to build an altar there.[66] Jacob "purifies" his household; apparently Dinah is not the only who has been defiled. The brothers' actions have also defiled the household. Jacob journeys with his camp to Bethel to build an altar to God and miraculously the sons escape revenge from the surrounding peoples because of the "terror of God."

Dinah: Socially Barren

Dinah, the one whose name connotes justice and vindication, is given no justice at all. Shechem violates her and then has the audacity to proceed to "normal" marriage negotiations as if her were a legitimate suitor. Dinah is a victim in another sense, the primary man who is supposed to care for her honour, her father, is disinterested and almost silent throughout the entire episode. Her brothers kill her rapist and soon-to-be-"husband" and take her away. Dinah's wishes or her voice is *never* heard in the narrative. The brothers seek to avenge their sister's defilement by killing the perpetrator, his family and the men of the city. In doing so their intent to restore honour comes under suspicion in the narrative. The "innocent" Shechemites who are slaughtered at the height of their pain before their wounds have healed also lack justice. The women and children who are taken captive by the brothers also lack justice as they witness their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons being killed.

There is no immediate judgment for the brothers who slaughter the innocent people. Yahweh preserves their lives by putting terror into the surrounding peoples so that they would not avenge the slaughter of the Shechemites. Jacob's silence casts him in a negative light; he does not speak up for his daughter. Yet, decades later Jacob pronounces a judgment on the brothers for their actions (Gen 49:5–7). In Dinah's narrative, and elsewhere in the book of

66 Genesis contains a theme of altars being at crucial times. "The Place" is used to re-orient Jacob and his family in respect to their future and the continuation of the Promise.

Genesis, it is apparent that justice for the oppressed does not always come at the expected time.[67]

Rites of passage are integral to human society. In traditional cultures the rituals further strengthen social status and social ties. Dinah is a young woman whose progression through womanhood is deferred by her rape. The life-stage in which a young woman is raped also has repercussions on subsequent rites of passage. An Akan young woman who is raped before undergoing her puberty rites is then prevented from experiencing this significant ceremony when the time comes. The reason for the exclusion from the puberty rites is supposedly not to blame the girl for her rape but that since she has been deflowered there is no need for the ceremony, which dwells heavily on virginity as a sign of purity.[68] Nevertheless, one can imagine that a girl who has been raped and excluded from subsequent puberty rites will not only feel rejected but also culpable for her perpetrator's crime. Dinah is in a liminal state, she is neither a girl, as Shechem views her, nor is she a woman. She is in limbo between being unmarried and given in a "pretend" marriage to her rapist. Dinah does not completely transition from one state to attain another. She remains stranded between childhood and wom(b)anhood.

While marriage is seen as the legitimate union to which one should aspire, it is not the ultimate rite of passage for Akan women. Customarily, in the event that a young woman could not find a suitable marriage partner because her past sexual trauma intimidated suitors, she could still be encouraged to have children outside of wedlock. Ultimately, the mother-child bond is the most coveted. Whether children are born to married or unmarried parents becomes secondary in the long-term and in the larger scheme of things. Dinah raped by Shechem and violently avenged by her brothers does not get justice at the close of the narrative. Dinah does not become a wom(b)an; she has been left socially barren. As in the case of her mother Leah, the men in her life have failed her.[69]

Dinah only receives one other mention within the HB. Genesis 46:8–27 gives an account of Jacob's family members who travelled with him to Egypt.

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67 Perhaps the best examples of this in Genesis are the Joseph and Tamar narratives in which they must wait years for the justice and reward due to them.

68 See chapter 3 for more on Akan puberty rites.

69 Laban, Leah's father does not protect her but rather uses her as a pawn for his own gain when he marries her to Jacob knowing that Jacob is in love with Rachel. Jacob, Dinah's father also fails to protect her when one wonders why he is virtually silent in this entire incident. In this way Jacob once again mirrors Laban not only as a deceptive character but also negligent in his father-daughter relationship.

Dinah is mentioned among the company (Gen 46:15). Jacob apparently has other unnamed daughters (Gen 46:7) and thus it is understandable that their children are also unnamed. Dinah is named alongside her brothers whose children are also named. Yet there is no mention of Dinah's children. Dinah disappears into genealogical obscurity—there is no one to carry on her name or memory. She never became a wom(b)an; this is most Akan women's nightmare.

Conclusion to Dinah's Narrative

Dinah's narrative should not be read as an etiological explanation of the perils of intermarriage, or the dangers of women straying from the confines of their tents. As evidenced in the ANE legal material as well as the texts in Exodus and Deuteronomy, fathers were the ones who were compensated when their daughters' sexuality was violated. However, Dinah's narrative presents a different picture. In the Torah "there was a clear link between a father and his daughter when it came to issues surrounding the woman's sexuality."[70] Both Jacob and Dinah's brothers fail in their duty. Not just to protect Dinah in the first instance but also in finding her a suitable marriage subsequent to her trauma.

Like her mother Dinah experiences social barrenness. Unlike her mother, we are not told if Dinah overcomes her social barrenness. She never has her own children mentioned in the *tôlĕdôt*. This is the end of Dinah's lineage. The Akan would say of Dinah, "*N'ase ahye*," (her lineage has ended).[71] Shechem's violation of Dinah should not be interpreted only as a momentary act, but an abuse that causes a permanent suspension in Dinah's progression through her rites of passage. Dinah never becomes a wom(b)an; she never becomes a mother.

This story is one of surprise, suspense with an ending that hangs in the air like the difficult question that the brothers pose. However, the greatest suspense is that Dinah is nowhere mentioned again. The greatest surprise is that despite cultural precedence of raped women being married after their trauma (either to the perpetrator or another suitor), Dinah is left alone. Dinah will have no lineage of her own to be included within the *tôlĕdôt*.

70 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 76.

71 Literally, her loins have been burned.

Princess Tamar's Narrative

Princess Tamar is the only named daughter of her father. Like her ancestress, Tamar is also sexually violated by a prince. Unlike Dinah, however, Tamar is raped by her half-brother. The narrative exposes the momentary and long-term effects of sexual violation, in this case incestuous rape. Tamar is forced, cast out and subsequently remains as a desolate woman. Tamar is frozen in time due to this trauma and becomes socially barren.

A Sexually Violated Sister

Tamar is the daughter of King David and Maacah, the daughter of the King of Geshur (2 Sam 3:3). Tamar is described as יָפָה "beautiful" and her full-brother Absalom is also noted for his appealing physique and head-of-hair (2 Sam 13:1; 14:25–26). Amnon, the villainous half-brother, is King David's firstborn son by Ahinoam, the Jezreelitess (2 Sam 3:2). At this point in the family history Amnon is the crown price, the heir to the Davidic dynasty.[72] The incestuous rape committed by Amnon is an atrocious act from a traditional standpoint since as a brother he is supposed to be the guardian, not the violator, of Tamar's sexual purity.

Amnon "loved" Tamar, apparently (2 Sam 13:1). This "love" is reminiscent of Shechem's "love" for Dinah (Gen 34:3). The storyline soon betrays the exact nature of Amnon's "love" for his paternal half-sister; it is "erotic obsession."[73] Amnon's licentious disposition, deceitful speech and forceful actions are far from loving. The prince will try to cloak his intention with the term "my sister," yet his true objective will be revealed.

Prince Amnon's obsession with his half-sister Tamar literally binds or ties him up to the point of illness (2 Sam 13:2). Amnon's infatuation is directly linked to Tamar's status as בְּתוּלָה, a never-married young woman (2 Sam 13:2).[74] Generally, בְּתוּלָה denotes a never-married young woman (Exod 22:16–17; Ezek 44:22); although, in one instance it describes a young woman bereaved early on in her marriage (Joel 1:8). The word specifically designates youthfulness in contrast to women of other life-stages (Ezek 9:6). A בְּתוּלָה in majority of usage is a woman who has not been sexually intimate with a man (Gen 24:16;

72 It is later that Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan lobby for Solomon to be king (1 Kgs 1:11ff).

73 Alter, *Ancient Israel,* 495.

74 Wenham, "Betûlāh, a Girl of Marriageable Age," 340. Wenham emphasises that the context must finally determine whether a woman is a virgin.

Deut 22:13–21; Judg 19:24; 21:12; Esth 2:2–3).[75] Tamar's purity, defined in traditional contexts as the ability to remain sexually abstinent before marriage, becomes a source of fixation for Amnon.

Amnon is obsessed with Tamar's virginal status. The "narrow carnal nature of Amnon's 'love'" is unfolding.[76] What fuels his desire, however, is also what presents a barrier. Thus, וַיִּפָּלֵא בְּעֵינֵי אַמְנוֹן לַעֲשׂוֹת לָהּ מְאוּמָה "It was difficult in the eyes of Amnon to do anything to her" (2 Sam 13:2). Unmarried princesses, like other young women, were expected to be sexually abstinent until marriage. Since their royal lineage made them public examples, princesses were likely in the care of custodians who would ensure their purity and protection.[77] Amnon's problem is one of access: how can he get free access to his sister if she is cloistered in a part of the palace?

What seemed difficult for Amnon, however, was surmountable for his friend-cousin Jonadab.[78] Jonadab is a אִישׁ חָכָם מְאֹד "an exceedingly shrewd man" (2 Sam 13:3). Often חָכָם is used in the positive sense of wisdom (Exod 35:10, 25; 1 Kgs 3:12). Here, however, it is a sinister shrewdness.[79] Jonadab intentionally addresses Amnon as בֶּן־הַמֶּלֶךְ "son of the king," perhaps implying that Amnon's actions do not befit a prince (2 Sam 13:4). For Jonadab acting princely means showing the ability to cunningly plot and take what you want, no matter what.[80] Both Amnon and Jonadab are associated with love and wisdom, words that tend to connote positive states, yet their thoughts and actions only expose skewed and sadistic counterfeits of these words.

Jonadab inquires as to why Amnon is getting progressively weaker each day. Amnon responds אֶת־תָּמָר אֲחוֹת אַבְשָׁלֹם אָחִי אֲנִי אֹהֵב "Tamar, the sister of Absalom my brother, I love" (2 Sam 13:4). The alliteration in Amnon's speech is like "a series of gasping sighs."[81] Instead of saying that Tamar is his sister

75 In metaphorical usage, the word represents cities/states such as Zion, Sidon and Babylon or Egypt (Isa 23:12; 37:22; 47:1; Jer 46:11).

76 Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 495.

77 Perhaps akin to the situation described in Esther 2 where the young virgins are kept in the custody of eunuchs.

78 Jonadab is the son of Shimeah, King David's brother (1 Sam 16:9; 2 Sam 13:3; 1 Chr 2:13).

79 Also used in this sense in Jer 4:22 "They are shrewd to do evil, but to do good they do not know."

80 Jonadab's speech can be compared to that of Queen Jezebel when Ahab is sulking after a failed negotiation for Naboth's vineyard. Both Jonadab and Jezebel's understanding of royal power is that if you want something badly enough, and the owner is unwilling to accede to your wishes, then you just take it (1 Kgs 21:4–7). These relatives to the royals both proceed to create a plan to satisfy the sinister desire.

81 McCarter, *II Samuel*, 321.

Amnon interestingly tries to distance himself by saying that she is "the sister of my brother Absalom" (2 Sam 13:4). That she is his half-sister makes it easier for Amnon to nurse his obsession.

Incest is one of the chief taboos within Akan society. No justification or excuse for incest is tolerated. Amnon attempts to absolve himself of responsibility concerning his incestuous desire by referring to Tamar as his brother's sister. This is puzzling to an Akan reader who believes that one is more related to the children of the parent who determines descent. In the Akan matrilineal system this means that your maternal half-siblings are just as closely related to you as your full-siblings. On the other hand, your paternal half-siblings are still considered to be important yet are reckoned as less related to you than your maternal half-siblings. Paternal half-siblings are typically distinguished by the common phrase "*me papa mma*" (my father's children). The Akan reader would expect that in a patrilineal system one's paternal half-siblings would also be just as related as one's full-siblings and therefore unsuitable sexual partners. Therefore, it is unclear how someone within a patrilineal system justifies the incestuous desire and/or action by imagining that a legitimate degree of separation exists between paternal half-siblings.

Without inquiring further, Jonadab devises a plan. Amnon must lie in bed and be ill enough to have the king visit him.[82] This pretense is reminiscent of an Egyptian love song, "I will lie down inside my house, I will pretend to be sick. Then my neighbours will come in to see, and my lover will come with them. She will put physicians to shame, she knows how to cure my illness."[83] Then he must ask the king "please let my sister[84] Tamar come and nourish me (וְתַבְרֵנִי) with food (לֶחֶם), and let her make the nourishment (הַבְּרִיָּה) in my sight, that I may see and eat from her hand" (2 Sam 13:5). This verb בָּרָה occurs six times within the HB, three of which are in the present narrative. In its usage it seems to refer to "the kind of eating that is sustaining or restoring to a person who is weak or fasting."[85] This food is not ordinary but a special type that will bring nourishment to a sick brother. Although Jonadab does not detail exactly what Amnon is to do once Tamar is in his presence, it is assumed that Amnon catches his meaning. Whether Jonadab intends to create a circumstance conducive

82 The detail is interesting because it has already been noted that Amnon is ill, so how can he make himself even more ill? Only by pretense.

83 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 189.

84 Earlier Amnon called Tamar "the sister of my brother Absalom" (v.4) in order to create distance but now to his father he must say "my sister" in order to quell any suspicion.

85 Alter, *Ancient Israel,* 496. Cf. 2 Sam 3:35; 12:17 and Lam 4:10.

for sexual violation[86] is beside the point. If Jonadab does not have sinister motives then why encourage Amnon to use deception as a means?

The prince follows the plan, although he shows some independence by not repeating verbatim what Jonadab had told him. He abbreviates Jonadab's speech and also specifies what kind of food he wants to eat, "please let my sister Tamar come and bake (וּתְלַבֵּב) a couple of cakes (לְבִבוֹת) in my sight, that I may eat from her hand" (2 Sam 13:6). These cakes could have been "heart-shape dumplings"[87] or pancakes. Elsewhere references to heart-shaped cakes, eyes, a sister and beauty evokes erotic love (Song of Songs 4:9–10).[88]

David seemingly does not expect the same cunning in his son that he had earlier exhibited in the case of Bathsheba. David asks no questions for it is not strange that a brother would ask his sister to visit and prepare food for him. Tamar visits "her brother" and finds him lying down (2 Sam 13:8). After Tamar kneads, bakes and lays out the cakes Amnon refuses to eat. Instead he sends everyone out of the room[89] and then instructs Tamar to bring the food into his inner chamber because he wants her to feed him (2 Sam 13:8–10). As soon as she is in the bedroom Amnon seizes her and commands "come, lie with me!" At this point the narrative highlights that "the appetite Amnon wanted Tamar to satisfy was sexual."[90] The dissonance between "come, lie with me" and "my sister" is apparent (2 Sam 13:11). "My sister," in combination with other accolades and compliments, is known as a term of endearment for a female lover

86 "It remains ambiguous whether Jonadab has in mind the facilitation of a rape …" Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 496.

87 Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 497. The verb occurs only twice, both of which are in the present narrative. The derivative לְבִבוֹת also occurs thrice in this narrative. The association with לֵב could refer to the cake's shape or its perceived benefit for the heart/soul; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 478.

88 Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 478–79. Auld suggests then suggests that David, and perhaps even Tamar, may have suspected Amnon's erotic motivations. Yet it is difficult to see this being supported in the larger narrative- Amnon is able to achieve his ends precisely because David and Tamar are oblivious to his intentions.

89 The phrase הוֹצִיאוּ כָל־אִישׁ מֵעָלָי is identical one that Joseph uses when he dismisses the Egyptians so that he can reveal himself to his brothers (Gen 45:1). "The story of the rape of Tamar continues to allude to the Joseph story, in reverse chronological order and with pointed thematic reversal"; Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 497.

90 Bader, *Sexual Violation in the Hebrew Bible*, 145.

within ANE poetry.[91] The sense here in 2 Sam 13, however, is opposite to the love scenes depicted in these love poems, Amnon spends no time complimenting his "sister" or inviting her to partake in mutual pleasure. It is notable that only in his request to the King and in the privacy of his bedroom does Amnon acknowledge his relationship to Tamar. Elsewhere she is the sister of Absalom.

Tamar's response in the midst of Amnon's force is "No, my brother, do not violate/humiliate me אַל־תְּעַנֵּנִי, for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do this senseless/disgraceful thing הַנְּבָלָה!" (2 Sam 13:12). Dinah was sexually violated by a foreigner whom she may have never met before, but Tamar is raped by a family member. The designation "my brother" again is not a term of endearment as found in ANE love poems but rather a reminder to Amnon about the familial relationship that makes this crime even more heinous.

Amnon is given further reason to desist from his violation; his half-sister refers to חֶרְפָּתִי "my reproach" as something that will stay with her while Amnon will be seen כְּאַחַד הַנְּבָלִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל "as one of the fools in Israel" (2 Sam 13:13). While rape reflects badly on the perpetrator and highlights his sadistic character, it is a disturbing reality that long-lasting scars and stigma are always the victim's burden. In Akan society illegitimate sexual activities typically wear worse on the women than the men. In traditional settings like that of ancient Israel and Akan society incestuous rape further compounds the injury of the victim; first, because of the trauma of violation and second, in having to bear the stigma of a taboo. Furthermore, in this ancient Israelite setting the rape would possibly diminish, perhaps destroy, the princesses' marriage prospects. Subsequently, an unmarried woman was more likely to be childless and this childlessness in the ancient world, and even in present traditional societies, is the greatest shame for a woman.

Tamar tries to appeal her way out of the situation. In order to avoid violation Tamar begs to find another way. "Now therefore, please speak to the king, for he will not withhold me from you" (2 Sam 13:13). Why is Tamar under the impression that David will make this union legitimate if Amnon first seeks his permission? Does Tamar know of preceding scenarios that convince her that it is probably that David will bless a union between her and Amnon?

Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of Israel, are apparently paternal half-siblings (Gen 20:12). Later YHWH prohibits certain sexual unions practiced in Canaan and Egypt (Lev 18:3). Since Abraham is originally a Canaanite

91 Examples include Sumerian love poem "the women's oath"; Sefati, "Love Poems," 540–41. Also the Egyptian love poem "Ostracon Gardiner 304"; Fox, "Love Poems," 130. Also, cf. Song 4:9, 10, 12; 5:1–2.

this may explain why his sister-wife relationship with Sarah does not come under any scrutiny in Canaan or during his sojourn in Egypt.

Incestuous relations, categorised as approaching a "blood relative" or a "near of kin," are prohibited (Lev 18:6–18).[92] The prohibition against sibling-incest is clarified twice. First, one's sister is off-limits as a sexual partner regardless of whether she was "born at home or born outside" (Lev 18:9). The note concerning birth locale may be concerned with the question of "legitimate" children. Being born at home, in the house of the father, signals that one as a legitimate part of the family. Being born outside may be a circumlocution for illegitimate births. On the other hand, the locution may emphasise that it does not matter whether or not you were reared with a sibling- if they are not connected by nurture in the same home they are still siblings by blood. Further, there is no defensible degree of separation because your paternal half-sister is still "your sister, you shall not uncover her nakedness" (Lev 18:11).

Based on Torah prohibitions it is unlikely that David would have permitted Amnon to marry princess Tamar. As the crown prince Amnon likely has been educated in Torah and knows that asking his father for permission to begin a relationship with his half-sister will not happen. Therefore the princess' plea doesn't work.

What Tamar suggests is a little ambiguous. Is she suggesting that David will allow Amnon to marry her or that David will consent to Amnon sleeping with her when he wills? As in the Akan context either solution is no solution at all; sleeping with or marrying one's sibling is still a grave taboo. Does Tamar really believe that David will be complicit in such a circumstance? It is likely that the princess is making every attempt to be free of her perpetrator.

Despite her protests and attempt to reason with him, Amnon forced himself on Tamar because he was stronger (2 Sam 13:14). Thereafter, Amnon's so-called love turned to hatred, with a greater intensity than his former infatuation (2 Sam 13:15). Just as he commanded her in the beginning he now shouts orders again "get up, go!" The princess refuses to leave, for Tamar the rape was senseless enough, but now ejecting her is even worse (2 Sam 13:16). "Rape was a dire fate, but one that could be compensated for by marriage, whereas the violated virgin rejected and abandoned by her violator was an unmarriageable

92 Father, mother, father's wife, father's daughter, mother's daughter, son's daughter, daughter's daughter, paternal half-sister, paternal aunt, maternal aunt, paternal uncle or his wife, daughter-in-law and a brother's wife. Additionally, if a man is sleeping with a woman—and she is not his wife—he cannot sleep with her daughter or any of her grandchildren. Sororal polygyny also seems to be included as a form of incestuous relationships.

outcast, condemned to a lifetime of 'desolation.'"[93] Unwilling to listen Amnon adds further insult to his victim's injury when he calls his servant to throw her out and lock the door behind her (2 Sam 13:17–18). His words are harsh: שִׁלְחוּ־נָא אֶת־זֹאת מֵעָלַי, literally, "please send *this* from me!"[94] For Amnon, Tamar is but a "disposable object" to be used, abused and then discarded.[95]

Tamar's Garment

Having been raped and ejected Tamar puts ashes on her head, tears her garment, and exits the scene with her hands on her head and with loud cries (2 Sam 13:19). Certain Western interpretations of this scene misconstrue Tamar's visual and vocal mourning as evidence *against* rape.[96] In particular the assumption that "rape victims hid their shame"[97] is a generalization that leads to further victimisation. ANE expressions of mourning were often visual and vocal acts that took place in public settings. Dinah and Tamar symbolise the myriad of victims whose testimony are enacted and reported in full or muted voice.

"Now she had on a כְּתֹנֶת פַּסִּים; for in this manner the virgin daughters of the king dressed in מְעִילִים" (2 Sam 13:18). Tamar, like her ancestor Joseph, wears this special garment (cf. Gen 37:3). Both characters are commissioned by their fathers, and it is during their compliance that "each was abused by brothers then cast out."[98] Tamar's garment כְּתֹנֶת פַּסִּים is likely not a "coat of many colours" but "a sleeved tunic"[99] or an ornamented garment[100] (2 Sam 13:18). The clothing is further described as one of the מְעִיל (robes) that virgin-princesses would wear. The language here is noteworthy since usually מְעִיל refer to male cultic or

93 Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 500.

94 The particle of entreaty is to strengthen the sense of the imperative. Amnon is exasperated and desperate to get "this" object out of his sight. Also, Bader notes the "verbal thread, the verb שָׁלַח (to send)" which is used of David when he sends Tamar (2 Sam 13:7); Tamar urges Amnon not to send her (2 Sam 13:16); but he does send her away nonetheless (2 Sam 13:17).

95 Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 48.

96 Reis, "Cupidity and Stupidity," 55. Reis' proposal that Tamar's outward mourning is a strategy to force Amnon to marry her is not at all germane to the narrative.

97 Reis, "Cupidity and Stupidity," 56.

98 Bledstein, "Tamar and the 'Coat of Many Colors'," 65.

99 Westermann, *Genesis*, 262.

100 Alter, following E. A. Speiser, thinks this is an ornamented tunic; Alter, *Ancient Israel*, 500.

royal garb.[101] Tamar's garment was likely a lavish garment that visually marked her prominent station.[102]

The significant function of clothing in Tamar's narrative is especially germane within a traditional cultural viewpoint. The Akan people have a famous woven cloth called *Kente*. This cloth, its weave pattern[103] and colours,[104] as well as how many pieces one is wearing,[105] communicates much about one's station in life. Customarily only royals wore this cloth. Much later when wealthier people were permitted to wear *Kente*, the royals were still distinguished because weavers wove unique designs for them. Even today it is considered an offense or taboo to weave the same *Kente* designs that a chief, or other prominent royals, wear.

The way cloth is worn is also an indicator of gender and socio-economic status. Royal men wore the *Kente* in such a way that one shoulder was bare and the cloth would be voluminous around the other shoulder and arm. Royal women wore two pieces of *Kente*, the first piece was wrapped around the waist and legs while the second piece was draped over one shoulder and draped down to the waist.[106] *Kente* cloths are given names that convey rich meaning; *Adwiniasa* (the mind/ideas have come to an end),[107] *Sikafuturo* (Gold dust),[108] *Ɛmmaada*

101 Bledstein, "Tamar and the 'Coat of Many Colors'," 73. See references to Aaron's cultic robes (Exod 28:4, 31, 34; 29:5; 39:22–26; Lev 8:7); Samuel's garments (1 Sam 2:19; 15:27; 28:14); Jonathan's princely garb (1 Sam 18:4); Saul's royal robe (1 Sam 24:4, 11); and David's garment that seems to be a cross between royal and Levitical attire (1 Chron 15:27).

102 Bledstein explores whether there was cultic significance to Tamar's clothing. He examines whether the princess was in the service of YHWH and that her "duties included some sort of divine inquiry/ritual purification for ill members of the royal house"; Bledstein, "Tamar and the 'Coat of Many Colors'," 73, 80.

103 The weave patterns carry different meanings based on references to proverbs, cultural traditions, and historical events.

104 The colour of the *Kente* cloth is assigned meaning and often determines the occasion to which one wears the cloth. Yellow is often representative of gold and wealth; red represents blood and sacrifice; green designates fertility; blue is symbolic of fortune and celebration and; white is representative of purity, spirituality and festivity.

105 The amount of yards of *Kente* one has to wrap around is an indicator of status and wealth. This is why Akan men typically wrap no less than six yards of cloth around themselves, and why royal women wore two big pieces of cloth as opposed to other female citizens who wore one.

106 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 112.

107 Meaning: All creativity and innovation have been exhausted in weaving this cloth. This pattern is usually thought to be one of the more complicated designs worn by royalty.

108 Meaning: signifies wealth and prominence.

(it has not happened before),[109] and *Nyankonton* (rainbow).[110] Traditionally, there were weave patterns dedicated to royal children. It is conceivable then that Tamar and other princesses would have had a woven cloth, specially commissioned and uniquely made for them, which designated royal status.

Further, a garment not only represents royal status but also signals nubility and purity. An initiate going through puberty rites is dressed in a special white cloth to signal her special status within the community.[111] The white cloth communicates that she is sexually mature for marriage and has retained the pure status of a virgin. During this time the initiate's family is approached with marriage proposals. There is also another link between the *Kente* and the white cloth that girls are given at this ceremony. At the conclusion of the puberty rites, the young woman is given *Kente* to commemorate her entrance into a new life-stage. Thus, *Kente* cloth is present in the three crucial life-stages of a woman; puberty rite, marriage and motherhood. Yet, the special cloth is nowhere as significant than in celebrating the ultimate life-stage of motherhood. Whether a humble or wealthy citizen, at one point in her life a woman may be regarded as royal—at the birth of her child. The more children a woman has the more she is celebrated with lavish and luxurious *Kente* cloth. This is the link between royalty and fertility; women are accorded royal status when they give birth. For an Akan reader, then, Tamar's tearing of her special garment is an outward display of her royalty *and* potential motherhood destroyed.

Tamar tears her robe to signal her violation. The princess mourns her previous virginal state.[112] Further, rending her garments was a public act and means to convey the horror that she has endured.[113] Testifying to her trauma in visual and vocal ways perhaps may also have been a way to protest the longstanding social propensity to blame a victim for seducing or enticing a perpetrator.

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109 Meaning: This cloth is usually worn on days when something new happens, something that has never happened before.

110 This cloth is woven to mimic the diversity of the rainbow and signifies creativity and beauty.

111 Sarpong, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 28.

112 In narratives like that of Judah, Joseph and David, clothing can be used to communicate gain or loss of power and status. "After Tamar is raped (ch. 13), she rips the splendid garment that she wore. The cloak was a sign of her status as princess, and its rending is a sign of mourning over the loss of her position and future. This should be seen as a symbolic loss for David as well. When Amnon is killed (13.31) David immediately rends his clothing"; Prouser, "Suited to the Throne," 35.

113 A woman was to outwardly mourn to show that she was not a willing party to a man's sexual approach cf. The Middle Assyrian Laws §23; Roth, "The Middle Assyrian Laws," 355–56.

A Silenced and Desolate Young Woman

Tamar's outward dishevelment leads to Absalom's observation. He knows that Amnon "your brother" has raped Tamar (2 Sam 13:20). It seems that Absalom wants to help his sister, however his words "but now keep silent, my sister, he is your brother; do not take this matter to heart" (2 Sam 13:20) are disturbing.[114] Why does he call for Tamar's silence and how can he tell her not to take the matter to heart? Evidently, Absalom does not want the matter going public before he has had a chance to plan his revenge.

Although Absalom has called for Tamar's silence this does not stop the reports getting back to King David. Upon hearing the incident David "was very angry," yet this is the extent of David's action or involvement (2 Sam 13:21). Besides anger David contributes nothing else to the situation. This seems to be a behavioural pattern for David.[115] In this sense his passiveness is comparable with Jacob's conduct when he finds out that Dinah has been raped. Both fathers do not take a proactive position on behalf of their daughters. This narrative highlights the dysfunction of David's household.[116]

David's failure to apprehend Amnon may be because, as heir apparent to the throne, Amnon is the king's favourite. Or perhaps David feels too humiliated to face the fact that he has been used as a pawn in his son's deception. While these reasons may play some role in David's inactivity it is more likely that there is another likely cause. It is difficult to castigate one's son for a crime of which one has previously been found guilty. David's sexual exploitation of Bathsheba looms large in this present narrative's background (2 Sam 11).

Tamar is a victim of a generational curse. Traditional cultures believe that generations may inherit misfortune based on the actions of their ancestors. While Amnon is accountable for his actions, he may have learned to justify this sort of behaviour by following in his father's footsteps.[117] Tamar is suffering the consequence of the curse that David has brought upon his family due to his sexual exploitation of Bathsheba. This curse is articulated in the language of "the sword" and "the evil" that will come from David's own house

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114 "It seems a very unfeeling choice of words"; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 480.

115 He will fail to confront and correct yet another son, the handsome Adonijah (1 Kgs 1:6).

116 Propp, "Kinship in 2 Samuel 13," 40. "The narrative poses a series of kinship puzzles. What is a family's proper response to rape? What if the rapist is a family member? Is a union of half siblings legal? What is the due punishment for incest? What is the penalty for fratricide? When a potential g*oël* is himself a killer, must another *gôël* serve as executioner? Almost sadistically the narrator snares David in a web of ambiguity and paradox entailing the ruin of three of his children."

117 Amnon and Absalom replay their father's sexual exploitation and murder; Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, 129.

(2 Sam 12:10–11). Later Absalom, on the advice of Ahithophel another "wise" man, will also sexually violate his father's concubines (2 Sam 16:21–22). In this respect David has not proved to be a positive influence for his sons.

David's passivity regarding Tamar is surprising for an Akan reader. In this matrilineal society it is imperative that parents ensure the wellbeing of their daughters. In doing so daughters are likely to grow up as well-rounded individuals, get married and continue the lineage, this is even more coveted when a royal dynasty is in view. A father who responsibly carries out the role of protector and nurturer will have honour accorded to him.

King David is very angry but does not act. Absalom, on the other hand, nurses his anger for two whole years not speaking a word to Amnon (2 Sam 13:22). In a deceptive fashion similar to that of Dinah's brothers, Absalom gets his brother Amnon drunk and then orders servants to kill him (2 Sam 13:28). Absalom's role and motives in this narrative are not completely above reproach.

The role of Tamar's brother Absalom is different from what an Akan reader might expect. In Akan culture a brother would not tell his sister to keep silent about rape. As his only full-sister it is Absalom's duty to encourage Tamar to voice her trauma and then heal from it. Furthermore, recognising the essential nature of childbirth Absalom would have explored appropriate suitors for his sister. In a matrilineal society it is a man's sister's children who are his true blood. That Absalom spends time plotting the murder of Amnon is a loss of focus in terms of what matters. After Amnon is dead, Tamar still resides in her brother Absalom's house. In light of Absalom's later attempt to usurp the throne, one wonders whether Absalom saw a "legitimate" way to eliminate his competition. It is possible that Absalom uses his sister Tamar's rape as a pretext for killing Amnon because he had his sights on the throne.

Absalom's honour killing cannot reverse the pain that Tamar endures. Yet there may be a clue that perhaps, upon reflection, Absalom seeks to make amends for silencing Tamar. It is noted that Absalom later has three sons and one daughter (2 Sam 14:27).[118] His sons are nameless but his daughter is not. Notably, the name of Absalom's only daughter is Tamar. Additionally just like her aunt, this girl is also noted for her beauty (cf. 2 Sam 13:1). Naming a child after one's relative is an honour but also a prophecy for the child to embody certain characteristics of that person.[119] It is not clear when Absalom's

118 It should be noted, however, that in 2 Sam 18:18 Absalom does not have any sons. Auld suggests that the sons are not named in 2 Sam 14:27 because they "all may have died in infancy"; Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 544.

119 It is not clear when Absalom's daughter was born, before or after her aunt's rape. It seems plausible that Absalom might make such a gesture but it is possible that she was already born before her aunt's experience.

daughter was born, before or after her aunt's rape. It is possible that she was already born yet it seems plausible that Absalom might name his newborn daughter as an honour to his sister after she has endured such a horrific experience.

Absalom wishes his daughter to embody the beauty and personhood of his sister. Further, it is also conceivable that Absalom understands Tamar's social barrenness and offers her namesake niece as a kind of adoptive daughter. Tamar, rendered unmarriageable by her half-brother's violent rape, may not be able to have children of her own but perhaps she takes some comfort in the person of her niece, Tamar.

Just as his daughter did two years prior, David now tears his clothing and mourns (2 Sam 13:31). Tamar was mourning for her violation, David is mourning for his murdered son. Jonadab, the cunning instigator, appears once more to clarify that not all the princes are dead, just Amnon (2 Sam 13:32–33). The narrative ends with wailing and weeping of all the princes and Absalom as a fugitive (2 Sam 13:34–37). One wonders who is weeping for Tamar, who is wailing for her loss?

Tamar not only experiences the multi-faceted violence of incestuous rape but also being scorned, spurned and silenced to boot. Tamar also laments because she suspects the loss of her status as a virgin-princess will impact her ability to go into the next life-passage of marriage.[120] No marriage meant that she would have no children. Tamar is socially barren because of actions forced upon her. The men in Tamar's life do not fulfil their responsibility of protection.[121] In fact, they are the cause of her desolation. The honour killing done by her brother Absalom does not bring any reparation or consolation to Tamar. Tamar remained forever frozen in time; she dwelt as שֹׁמֵמָה a desolate and devastated woman in her brother Absalom's house (2 Sam 13:20).[122]

Tamar does not get married or have children. She does not become a wom(b)an. "Motherhood or death. For biblical daughters the 'choice' is stark and uncompromising, and it all seems to turn on their maturing sexuality."[123] Tamar is desolate and suffers genealogical death; her direct descendants will

120 "That Tamar was rendered unmarriageable by the rape is also suggested by her statement that Amnon's rejection of her after having violated her was a greater wrong than the violation itself (v. 16)"; Pressler, *The View of Women*, 103.

121 Shargent draws a contrast between Absalom and David. At least she is "cared for by her brother behind the walls of his house, her father evinces no concern for her"; Shargent, "Living on the Edge," 35–36.

122 Elsewhere the figure of a desolate woman is applied to Judah who is pictured as an unmarried, childless woman (Lam 1:13; Isa 54:1; 62:4).

123 Shargent, "Living on the Edge," 35–36.

never exist in the *tôlĕdôt* of Israel. In being raped, and not moving to the next rites of passage, marriage and childbirth, Tamar is twice a victim.

Conclusion to Princess Tamar's Narrative

This study proposes that social barrenness was just as devastating as biological barrenness. Women were unable to have children due to not having a husband either because they were unmarriageable or the husband was estranged or deceased. The description of Tamar as שֹׁמֵמָה "a desolate one" in her brother's house (2 Sam 13:20) is to emphasise her being "rendered unmarriageable by her rape."[124] While rape is the main theme of Tamar's narrative, the consequence of this rape, in the ANE context, is just as terrible: social barrenness.

Neither Dinah nor Tamar get an opportunity to become wom(b)en. They are frozen in time, suspended between childhood and motherhood. To make matters worse, to add further tragedy to their trauma, the father and brothers who are supposed to protect and ensure a good marriage prospect for them are either silent or take the opportunity to enact revenge that brings no restitution to these violated women.

Dinah and Tamar are both the only named daughters in their families. They are both destitute daughters and silenced sisters as well as violated women. In Dinah and Tamar's cases it is their brothers who use this occasion to exact their own kind of revenge. These killings are meant to restore honour but really they add to the injuries of the young women. The only named daughters have passive fathers who do not do their due diligence.

Tamar's narrative is not one only centred on the immediate rape but also on the lasting effects of such a trauma. After facing the ordeal at the hands of her half-brother Amnon, Tamar is then told by her brother Absalom to keep silent and forget the matter. King David does not take a proactive role, either to discipline Amnon or to comfort Tamar. The subsequent honour killing and revenge does nothing to repair or change Tamar's circumstance. Rather, having been prevented from moving into the life-passage of marriage Tamar remains as a resident in Absalom's house. Not only has she endured the immediate violence of rape but she also has to endure the long-term, even permanent, consequence of rape in the ancient context: social barrenness. Since Tamar cannot marry, she cannot have children. Yet, possibly hope comes in the form of her namesake niece who embodies her beauty and may be a way through which Tamar can cope with her social barrenness.

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124 Lipka, *Sexual Transgression in the Hebrew Bible*, 178.

Women, despite their socio-economic status, have historically been vulnerable to sexual crimes. It would be expected that a princess, likely heavily chaperoned, would not experience such a trauma, or that a young woman with many brothers would be safe from the harm of another man. Yet, Dinah and Tamar, represent the spectrum of women—migrants to monarchs—who are still susceptible to sexual abuse. In traditional societies, the violation that you have experienced can quickly become an experience that eclipses one's identity. Dinah and Princess Tamar remain silent and desolate, they stay in a continual state of social barrenness.

The added tragedy that accompanies the rape of Dinah and Tamar is that they remain unmarried and unable to have children; therefore, they are no longer alive in the lineage. Shechem and Amnon's violations are not only sexual; they are genealogical assassinations—through their actions they have written these women out of the continuing history of Israel. The raping of Dinah and Tamar are not just momentary actions with life-long effects but they also have future genealogical consequence. Shechem and Amnon's actions deprive these women of the traditional legacy of having direct descendants counted in the history of Israel. Violation is followed by desolation and ultimately genealogical death.

CHAPTER 8

Tamar and Naomi-Ruth: Widows

Historically widows have faced stigmatisation and exploitation. Even today many widows endure religious, social, financial and sexual abuse. They are vulnerable persons. One can imagine that these prevalent abuses against widows were even more pronounced in times past. In ancient times the circumstances would have been dire in contexts where women depended heavily on men for their livelihood and protection.

The following section examines the narratives of Tamar (Gen 38) and Naomi and Ruth. Here it will be proposed that Tamar, Ruth and Naomi are depicted as barren women not in biological terms but in the social category of widowhood. Since they are widows, and in Naomi's case have been bereaved of sons, they cannot have children unless they are able to enter into a levirate marriage proper or levirate-type marriage. Additionally, since the men who should be taking initiative on their behalf do not (in the case of Tamar), or cannot (in the case of Naomi and Ruth) take initiative, the women must take initiative to secure their future.

Tamar: Twice Widowed, Doubly Blessed

Tamar journeys through challenging terrain of levirate marriage and social barrenness. Deception plays a prominent role in this narrative. It is Judah's deception that keeps Tamar socially barren and it is deception that Tamar will use to rectify her situation. Tamar's solution, to attain what she desires most, is one of the more extreme strategies utilised within the barrenness tradition. Twice widowed, Tamar will do what she deems necessary in order to become a wom(b)an.

Judah leaves his father Jacob and his brothers behind after they sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites. It was Judah's idea to sell Joseph and get financial reward rather than to kill him and get nothing at all (Gen 37:26–27). Reuben's secret plan to come back and secretly rescue Joseph out of the pit was quashed by his younger brother Judah (Gen 37:22). Jacob's grief over the alleged murder of Joseph was too great and he would not be comforted by any of his children (Gen 37:35). Likely because he was the instigator behind Joseph's slavery, Judah felt prompted to seek a change of scenery. This is how we arrive at the setting of the present narrative.

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Judah visits his friend Hirah the Adullamite (Gen 38:1). Taking trips to see foreign friends seems to foreshadow unfortunate events for Jacob's children (cf. Gen 34:1). While visiting Hirah, Judah meets a Canaanite man called Shua who has a daughter (Gen 38:2). Becoming a permanent resident there Judah has three sons with Shua's daughter: Er, Onan and Shelah.

Many years pass by, and again the custom of fathers acquiring brides for their sons is enacted. Judah finds a wife called Tamar for his son Er (Gen 38:6). Tamar's ethnic identity is uncertain and apparently Judah, unlike his ancestors Abraham and Rebekah, is not so concerned about the region or family into which his son is marrying.

The marriage does not last long because Er dies due to supernatural causes; Yahweh makes a fatal judgement (Gen 38:7). This supernatural activity begs the question of what Er could have possibly done that would be so evil in Yahweh's estimation. After all, Judah had sold his own brother into Egyptian slavery and his life had not been required of him. However, the narrative remains silent as to the nature of Er's evil, the only thing is that it is despicable enough to warrant being killed by Yahweh.

Onan's Levirate Duty

Before moving to the specific instance of Onan and Tamar's marriage it is helpful to make a few comments about levirate marriage.[1] There was no specific Israelite law that ensured a widow had access to her deceased husband's property.[2] Her saving grace was a levirate marriage. The levirate law in was not only concerned with the preservation of the deceased's name but also with the inheritance of the ancestral property (Deut 25:5–10).[3] Thus, the two-fold purpose of levirate marriage was indivisible: to preserve the memory of the deceased through the birth of a son and for that son to inherit the ancestral land.[4] The deceased man's "right to have a son" was to be respected even after his death.[5]

Genesis 38 describes an earlier stage of the levirate marriage since the custom seems more binding here than in Ruth's narrative.[6] Tamar's marriages are similar to the situations described in Deuteronomy 25:5–10. Additionally, that

1 Levirate marriage will be further examined in the section on Naomi-Ruth.

2 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 138.

3 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 142.

4 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 142.

5 "The levirate shows that a man's right to have a son holds good even after he is dead"; Burrows, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," 31.

6 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 263.

the failure of the levir to perform his duty resulted in shame is what happens in Gen 38. It is possible that there was a development in the stringency of the levirate law by the time of Ruth's narrative.[7]

Judah commanded Onan, his second son, to perform his levirate duty (Gen 38:8). Onan knowing that the child he sired with Tamar would belong to his deceased brother, and additionally would cost him his chance of being the sole heir to his property and wealth, decides he does not want to build Er's legacy but his own. It was more profitable for him to appear to be fulfilling his duty, that is, he would go in and have sexual relations with Tamar, but he repeatedly "poured onto the ground," that is ejaculated semen onto the ground, to ensure that she did not become pregnant (Gen 38:9). The Hebrew construction suggests that Onan's ejaculation onto the ground happened on more than one occasion.[8]

Sex omens within the omen compilation *Šumma ālu* discuss excess ejaculation, and ejaculation outside the vagina, as predictors of fortune or doom.[9] Semen was not only regarded as a bodily fluid but as "a man's capital which can be squandered or well spent."[10] It is for this reason that a sex omen states that "if a man persistently (has sexual relations) with a woman and always ejaculates repeatedly, he will die in his prime."[11] Excessive and careless ejaculation was thought to be a squandering of potential life and therefore it was frowned upon.[12] Perhaps, then, Onan's death would not have been so surprising in his cultural context for it was already believed that "wasting" one's semen would bring not only financial loss but eventually death.

In repeatedly spilling his semen Onan was ensuring that there would be no son for his dead brother, thereby making him the uncontested heir of his deceased brother's estate.[13] Onan was not astute enough for "even though the first-born son of the widow would eventually inherit the property of the deceased brother, the levir himself would have had a number of years to exploit

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7 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 267.

8 The Septuagint also depicts a continual violation of duty by using the temporal conditional clause, ὅταν εἰσήρχετο πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ, ἐξέχεεν ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, "whenever he was going into his brother's wife he was pouring out upon the ground" (Wevers, *Notes on Greek Genesis*, 634).

9 Guinan, "Auguries of Hegemony," 42. Original tablets 103–104 in Gadd, *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets*.

10 Guinan, "Auguries of Hegemony," 42.

11 Guinan, "Auguries of Hegemony," 43.

12 Guinan, "Auguries of Hegemony," 43.

13 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 257–58. Also, Matlock, "Obeying the First Part of the Tenth Commandment," 307.

the land to his own advantage, and his willing performance of the levirate duty need not necessarily, therefore, have involved a financial loss."[14] However short-sighted Onan was, the extent of his evil was not only that his actions dishonoured his brother's memory. In addition to this Onan's sexual relationship with Tamar was selfish and spiteful, it afforded Tamar no benefit[15] and no children to provide her with a permanent connection to the family of Judah.[16] With every semen-spill Onan severs both his brother's and Tamar's connection to the Judah clan.

Yahweh found Onan to be just as evil as his brother Er and so he also kills him (Gen 38:10). Tamar is widowed for the second time. Judah, her father-in-law, advises her to return to her father's house and live as a widow until Shelah, the lastborn, is of marriageable age (Gen 38:11). Tamar is characterised as the exemplary daughter-in-law for she does not protest Judah's request. The narrator offers the real reason behind Judah's dismissal of Tamar; he is afraid that his lastborn will die, just like his two older sons did, if he marries Tamar (Gen 38:11).[17] Such thinking shows that Judah was perhaps oblivious to the actions of Er and Onan. For Judah the only common denominator between his son's deaths was not their evil but it was Tamar.

Tamar may be viewed as a cursed woman in Akan culture. A woman whose husbands have both died would be suspected of some ill intentions or actions. A widow, in some cases, may be suspected of foul play and responsible for her husbands' sudden demise. Rather than considering that a husband's death may be the result of divine judgment some widows have found themselves the subjects of various rituals that are intended to prove or disprove her role in the husband's death. Such a train of thought seems to be that of Judah in the Hebrew narrative.

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14 Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage," 259.

15 Lambe describes Onan's actions as deception "Tamar is deceived by Onan each time that he cohabites with her, for Tamar expects Onan to be responsible to the Levirate law"; Lambe, "Genesis 38," 107.

16 Niditch, writing of the childbearing role of women in ANE marriage, states that a wife's "children are a visible statement of her connection with the clan … if the woman has not borne his children, however, she has never fully become a member of his family"; Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted," 144–45.

17 Possibly, Judah may have wanted Tamar to go back home and find a new husband, just as Naomi asks Ruth and Orpah to return home for the same purpose (Ruth 1:8–9). However, while Naomi makes it explicit that this is what she wants for the young women, Judah, on the other hand, specifically mentions Shelah as a potential husband for Tamar (Gen 38:11). Perhaps, Judah thought that Tamar could not wait for this time and would eventually marry another.

Tamar is the daughter-in-law who is silent and compliant. The narrative does not detail that she mourned for her dead husbands or that she protests her dismissal. Furthermore, the unspecified amount of years that it would take for Shelah to be ready for marriage is very ambiguous. However, silence and patience will be taken for granted by Judah. The father has no intention of losing his lastborn son.

Tamar Turns the Tables

During this time, Judah's wife is still alive and yet curiously has no input into the actions of her son's marriages. Judah's wife is the most silent character in the narrative; she outlives her first two sons but has fewer actions than they do. Her only actions are giving birth to three sons, naming two of them,[18] and then later dying.

When Judah's wife dies he observes a mourning period for her, and then goes to sheer his sheep with his friend Hirah the Adullamite (Gen 38:12). Tamar has been out of the narrative scene for some unspecified years but now she re-enters the plot. The widow who has gone back to her father's house where she is not too far away to miss the report of her father-in-law's whereabouts (Gen 38:13). This is the turning point in the narrative; the plot is about to be further complicated before its resolution. Tamar will no longer be the passive daughter-in-law. Now she will begin to take a series of actions that will have surprising consequences.

The description of Tamar's actions is noteworthy. First, Tamar sheds her widow garments and covers herself with a veil (Gen 38:14).[19] By wearing the veil does Tamar intend to masquerade as a prostitute? Typically, it has been thought that this is Tamar's intent. Astour goes further in this vein to conclude that Tamar was a cultic prostitute when she first married Er and that remaining childless was part of her vocational vow.[20] Citing some extant sources that detail priestesses, who when discovered to be pregnant, are burned, Astour concludes that Tamar is a cultic priestess because Judah calls for her to be burned.[21] Yet, it is difficult to sustain the idea of a vocational vow of childlessness. Since

18 The Hebrew notes that she named the last two sons but not the firstborn, Er. The Septuagint attributes the naming all three sons to Judah's wife.

19 צָעִיף "veil" occurs thrice in the HB (Gen 24:65; 38:14, 19). It was probably a light cloth that could be used as a shoulder wrap or a face covering.

20 Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule," 192. Astour does not believe that Onan's semen-spilling is part of the original narrative.

21 Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule," 192.

Tamar goes to great lengths in order to have a child it is doubtful that she is bound to a vow of childlessness.

Excerpts from the Assyrian laws of the middle period counteract the claim that Tamar intended to masquerade as a prostitute. These laws prohibit "unmarried hierodules, prostitutes and female slaves on pain of severe punishment to veil themselves or to cover their head."[22] Typically veiling was reserved for "respectable Assyrian women."[23] Additionally, instances such as that of Rebekah wearing a veil before seeing Isaac (Gen 24:65) caution against an automatic assumption that Tamar is posing as a prostitute.[24] The veil, in this case, is used simply for the practical purpose of hiding her face from Judah.[25] It is Judah who supposes that Tamar is a harlot, yet the narrator does not comment, affirmatively or otherwise, on this assumption.[26]

The motivation for Tamar's deliberate actions is that she has discovered that Shelah is grown-up and that seemingly Judah does not intend to contract a marriage between Shelah and Tamar (Gen 38:14). The power that Judah exercised over Tamar would not be allowed in Akan culture for even if a woman gets married she belongs more to her matrilineage than her husband's family. If her matriclan suspected that Judah was withholding his last son from her they would seek compensation and then contract another marriage for Tamar. It is extremely unlikely that any family would encourage a woman to wait all those years for a young man to grow up so that she could honour the name of her deceased husband. In Akan's matrilineal system the chief concern is for women to bear children for the matrilineage; the top priority is not to honour the deceased husband. Due to the essential nature of *mogya*, "matrilineal blood," Tamar's family would not have allowed her to stay widowed for years while she was still of childbearing years. Tamar decides to counter Judah's deception with her own. The intent behind Tamar's shedding and changing of clothes is successful: Judah does not recognise her (Gen 38:15).

Additionally, the location that Tamar chooses is not a hidden place but an open one where everyone can see her. The phrase בְּפֶתַח עֵינַיִם (at the entrance to Enaim) may also be read literally as "in the opening of the eyes." Whichever reading one chooses, it is no doubt referring to a public place. Judah's wish to

22 Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 39.

23 Seibert, *Woman in Ancient Near East*, 39.

24 Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 154.

25 Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 155.

26 Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine," 123. Also, Shields agrees "Tamar merely wraps herself in a veil; Judah takes it from there. As with his son's deaths, and as he will also do later in the story, he sees what he desires to see"; Shields, "'More Righteous Than I'," 41.

"come in to" Tamar is a euphemistic request for a sexual encounter (Gen 38:16). Tamar's shrewd bargaining, however, brings a pause to Judah's advances. She takes Judah's seal, cord and staff as a pledge until he can send a young goat as payment for her sexual services (Gen 38:18). The irony here is apparent; Judah's shrewdness, which he exhibits earlier in the narrative,[27] is lacking here and he is unable to detect the danger of agreeing to such a pledge.

Tamar's encounter with Judah has proved more productive than her marriages to both of his sons. Judah has spilled no semen on the ground and so Tamar conceives. The role of garments in the turning points of Tamar's narrative is interesting. After her encounter with Judah, Tamar sheds the evidence of her deception and again puts on her widow-garments (Gen 38:19).

Judah, although not characterised as moral up until this point, is surprisingly eager to keep his side of the bargain (Gen 38:20). However, instead of going to look for the "prostitute" himself he sends the Adullamite with a young goat from the flock just as he promised. His friend searches for the woman in the veil that Judah had told him about but he cannot find her. He asks the men of the town about the whereabouts of הַקְּדֵשָׁה "the cultic prostitute" (Gen 38:21). This is interesting since earlier Judah thinks that Tamar is a זוֹנָה (Gen 38:15). Bird explains that the usage of the two different terms by the friends is deliberate. The Adullamite uses הַקְּדֵשָׁה instead of זוֹנָה because he is speaking in a public place and this is a widely acceptable term in Canaanite custom.[28] Since הַקְּדֵשָׁה could be employed to refer to a wet nurse, midwife, gynaecology expert, as well as someone providing sexual services, Judah's friend was attempting to put the anonymous woman "in a more respectable category" than did Judah.[29] Despite being a wordsmith, the Adullamite cannot find the anonymous woman and the friends realize that they must abandon the search for the sake of their reputations (Gen 38:23).

Three months pass and Judah learns that his daughter-in-law is pregnant (Gen 38:24). The "reporting" from the anonymous sources links both the

27 First, when he suggests that selling Joseph will be more profitable than killing him (Gen 37:26–27), and secondly when he send Tamar back to her Father's house knowing full well that he has no intention of allowing her to marry his lastborn Shelah (Gen 38:11). Interestingly, in both of these cases Judah is condemning these two people to social situations that are akin to death- a life of slavery in a foreign land and a life as a childless widow.

28 Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine," 125–26. Such a substitution, she claims, is "comparable to our substitution of the term 'courtesan' for the cruder expression 'whore'—(a substitution of court language in the latter instance, cult language in the former)."

29 Schneider, *Mothers of Promise*, 153.

characters' actions.[30] The phrase "it was reported to Tamar" results in Tamar's provocative plan (Gen 38:13). When the phrase "it is reported to Judah" is used it leads to him demanding that Tamar be punished (Gen 38:24). Judah is about to realise that he has met his match in Tamar. Judah's cry, "bring her out and let her be burned!" is vengeful (Gen 38:24). He has not sought out the context of Tamar's הָרָה לִזְנוּנִים (pregnancy by fornication)[31] (Gen 38:24). Perhaps he sees here the perfect opportunity to be rid of the promise of giving his third son in marriage to Tamar. Burning was not the customary punishment for fornication or adultery;[32] there are only a few sources that point to this method in the place of stoning.[33] The irony is clear, Judah feels it is fine to proposition a woman who he believes to be a harlot, but when he finds out that his daughter-in-law is guilty of fornication he is ready to have her burned.[34]

Judah's shrewdness, keeping Shelah away from Tamar, is no match for Tamar's shrewdness. Hearing of her imminent doom, Tamar calmly sends a message to her father-in-law with the signet, cord and staff. Tongue-in-cheek she states that the father is the one to whom the articles belong. Judah has been caught; he is responsible for Tamar's pregnancy (Gen 38:25). The narrative draws to a close with Judah's confession "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah," and the narrative statement that he did not sleep with Tamar again (Gen 38:26). Judah understands that if he had kept to his promise Tamar would not have resorted to her deception. Additionally, he knows that the custom of the levirate marriage does not

30 The verb וַיֻּגַּד (hophal imperfect 3ms) followed by lamed is the impetus for both Tamar's and Judah's actions (Gen 38:13, 24).

31 Here "fornication" is probably a better translation than harlotry or prostitution since the reporters probably do not know the details of what Tamar did to get pregnant. Additionally, in the HB *zānâ* is used to convey a variety of extramarital sexual activities that include fornication and adultery not just "professional" prostitution. Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine," 124.

32 Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule," 193–94.

33 "If *there is* a man who takes a woman and her mother, it is immorality; both he and they shall be burned with fire, so that there will be no immorality in your midst" (Lev 20:14). "Also the daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by harlotry, she profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire" (Lev 21:9). The Code of Hammurabi states that certain classes of priestess were to be burned if they entered a beerhouse to drink beer (CH §110) or a mother and son who had sexual intercourse were also to be burned (CH §157). Elsewhere, burning is described as a punishment for taking things under the ban as in Achan's case (Josh 7:15).

34 Bird, "The Harlot as Heroine," 124.

extend to the father of the deceased son and so he does not sleep with her again.[35] Now that Judah has slept with Tamar she cannot be married to Shelah and so she must remain in her widow state.[36]

We should emphasise that Tamar's vindication is not only the climax within the present narrative but also a turning point in the Jacob-Joseph cycle. It is Judah's encounter with Tamar that teaches him the importance of protecting "the most vulnerable members of his society," this is why he later takes on the role of Benjamin's protector (Gen 44:16–34).[37] In this way Tamar is not only the heroine of the story but also one that informs a change in Judah's character and his subsequent actions within the Jacob–Joseph cycle.

Tamar's Twins

Unlike Rebekah, Tamar has no divine revelation to inform her that she is pregnant with twins (cf. Gen 25:23). It is only at delivery that this becomes evident to the midwife. The first twin puts out a hand first and the midwife ties a scarlet thread onto his hand anticipating his lead arrival (Gen 38:28). However, the other twin emerges first. The obstetrical details are very unclear; it is not certain how a twin delivery can follow the exact details of this narrative. Yet, the theme of unexpected reversals is prominent within Genesis. The last becomes first and the younger usurps the elder. The firstborn is named Perez and the twin with the scarlet thread is named Zerah (Gen 38:30). Normally, married women are able to name their sons because of the legitimate context within which they give birth. However, in this case the father does the naming.

In Akan *ntafo* (twins) hold a mystical or sacred position within their families and the community for they are viewed as an extraordinary gift from *Nyame* (God). Male twins often served at royal court and only the Chief could marry twin sisters.[38] The scarlet thread being placed around Zerah's hand is significant because when twins are born they have red and yellow beads and cowries tied to their hands to signify their special status. Although, in the Hebrew narrative only one twin receives the scarlet thread bracelet and the bracelet is more for the purpose of determining birth order than it is an amulet. Zerah was supposed to be *Ata Panyin* (the eldest twin) but instead *Ata Kakra* (the

35 Astour points out that on the other hand, "according to the Assyrian laws (A, § 33), a father-in-law could marry the childless widow of his son"; Astour, "Tamar the Hierodule," 195.

36 Interestingly, Shelah is noted to have children and even names his firstborn son Er (1 Chr 4:21–22).

37 Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization," 672.

38 Kwadwo, *A Handbook on Asante Culture*, 21.

younger twin) is delivered first. This continues the HB's motif of the younger sibling that takes the prominent position of the older sibling.[39]

The fact that twins had their own annual festival and sacred day (Friday), also adds to the honour bestowed on mothers of multiples. Due to her oppressed past the whole community and family would celebrate Tamar's pregnancy, even if it were achieved through deceptive means. Twice widowed, the Akan would see the twins as a reward and consolation for Tamar's years of social barrenness.

Conclusion to Tamar: Twice Widowed, Double Blessed

Within the barrenness tradition Tamar is the only woman who is married, and widowed, twice. Yahweh kills one husband for an unknown reason while the second is killed for wasting his sperm on the ground. The second death is interesting in that it shows the importance placed on childbirth. For in Tamar's story we learn that refusing conception rights was viewed in the same way as refusing conjugal rights. In other words, a man who repeatedly had sex with his childless wife while intentionally not impregnating her was viewed in the same way as a man who refused to sleep with his wife.

Judah has met his match in Tamar; she is just as, and probably more, shrewd than him. Who advocates for Tamar, neither her deceased husbands' family nor her own? Tamar, twice widowed is a woman who must assess her options and choose her path. She wants to be a wom(b)an and will do all within her power to ensure that she does. The point that Tamar goes to such lengths to ensure her conception indicates the toll that social barrenness could take on an ancient woman. For Tamar the ends justified the means.

Tamar whose name means "palm tree," (often a symbol of fertility), finally fulfils her name.[40] She is fruitful with the children that she desires. Tamar's actions are neither explicitly applauded nor condemned, rather the fact that she has two sons who will be able to look after her when they come of age reminds us of the two husbands, and father-in-law, who would not. Tamar has become a wom(b)an despite her widowhood and the deception of Judah, she takes on the trickster role to rid herself of social barrenness.

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39 Younger siblings who become more prominent than their older siblings include Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Ephraim, Moses, David and Solomon; Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together*, 13.

40 Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis*, 101.

While the story ends positively in that Tamar gives birth to twin sons, the reality remains that Tamar does not have a husband and Judah also does not sleep with her again (Gen 38:26). Marriage was the context within which women could have as many children as possible. At the narrative's close Tamar is a triumphant mother of twins, and yet on the other hand she is still an unmarried woman who does not have more children.

The Naomi-Ruth Narrative

The Naomi-Ruth narrative centres on two women who overcome the trials of famine, widowhood and infertility. The present narrative is the only one, within the barrenness tradition, that details so much about the woman's life before the arrival of a baby. Naomi's widowhood and childlessness is viewed more tragically, she uses the words "empty" and "bitter," while Ruth does not comment on her own childlessness, or directly petition divine aid to resolve her situation.

This chapter will show that Naomi and Ruth endured social barrenness. It is Naomi who feels more destitute by this social barrenness than her daughter-in-law Ruth. This will be vital to understanding that it is primarily Naomi's childlessness that is resolved in this story. This narrative bears the name of Ruth because she is the character that enables the resolution of Naomi's destitution. The surrogacy role of Ruth will be examined in this chapter.

An Infertility Narrative

This is an infertility narrative concerned, at first, with the infertility of Bethlehem's land. However, it ends up being about the infertility of Naomi's lineage and how this crisis finds resolution. Additionally, Ruth's narrative gives perhaps the clearest glimpse into female relationships within the HB.[41] Ruth's narrative illustrates the reality that the birth of a baby also resulted in the rebirth of the mother as she gains an identity that overshadowed past experiences. The narrative background will set the context for the discussion on infertility.

The book of Ruth begins with the woe of famine. Already there is a theological tension: there is a famine in Bethlehem, the house of bread. Yahweh had earlier promised in the Abrahamic covenant that there would be blessings of many descendants and fertile land. At the onset of this narrative the question arises, "can Yahweh keep his promise of fertility?" Why is there a famine?

41 Meyers, "'Women of the Neighborhood' (Ruth 4:17)," 119.

Perhaps, the answer is found in the notice given at the commencement of the narrative, "now it came about in the days when the judges governed" (Ruth 1:1a). This places the turn of events during the time of the Judges, which is characterised by the phrase "every one did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg 17:6; 21:25). It is a possibility, then, according to the system of covenant curses, that this famine was a divine chastisement for the moral decline and cyclical nature of sin and repentance characteristic of this period. In light of Yahweh's covenant dealings with Israel the famine may be a punishment of Israel's disobedience or it may be a test of loyalty.[42]

Whatever the specific cause of the famine—whether drought, locusts, or hostile neighbours—the famine was severe enough[43] for Elimelech to take the decisive action of relocating his family to the fields of Moab.[44] The "fields of Moab" probably refers to the fertile area of Mishor, north of the River Arnon[45] because Moab proper, being east of Bethlehem, would have received less rainwater due to its placement in the rain shadow.[46] This environmental lack is what forms the backdrop of the narrative and presents emptiness, famine

42 Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth," 420.

43 Did Elimelech and Naomi's family run at the first sign of trouble? We may question the severity of the famine because it appears that there were other people in Bethlehem who stayed behind. However, MacDonald suggests that migration, as a solution to food shortage and famine, was only undertaken in dire circumstances since leaving one's land was deemed to be "high risk"; MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?*, 59.

44 The mention of Moab as a setting already evokes the narrative of Lot's daughters. Moab as a location is in complete juxtaposition here to Bethlehem. Can anything good come out of the Elimelech family's stay in Moab? Gage details the literary connections between Ruth's narrative and that of Lot's daughters: Ruth's presence on the threshing floor is contrasted with Lot's daughters in the cave; incest is contrasted with levirate marriage; Lot's passivity with Boaz's proactivity; Ruth's position at Boaz's feet versus Lot's daughters' sexual activity with Lot; and Lot's daughters taking "seed" from their father versus Boaz giving Ruth grain as she takes her leave; Gage, "Ruth Upon the Threshing Floor and the Sin of Gibeah," 371–73. The country that once refused safe passage to the newly liberated Israelites and also sought to invoke curses on them (Deut 23:4) are now responsible for offering food, residence and brides for Elimelech's family. In this way "Ruth redeems Moab"; Trible, "Ruth: A Text in Therapy," 34.

45 Ray asserts that drought was the cause of this famine and that if this narrative is situated within the eighteen-year rule of the Moabites (Judg 3:14) then Mishor would have been taken as territory of Moab, hence the term "the fields of Moab"; Ray, "The Story of Ruth," 4–5. Also agreeing, Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 5.

46 Staples, "The Book of Ruth," 148. This is the argument that Staples uses to dismiss drought as the cause of this famine, but he does not consider that "fields of Moab" can refer to Mishor as well.

and displacement as challenges to be resolved in the narrative's progress. The land's infertility sends Elimelech and his family away from Judah while its renewed fertility will bring Naomi back to Judah with her daughter-in-law Ruth in tow.

The food security in Moab cannot ward off another misfortune: death. Elimelech dies followed about ten years later by his two sons, and the narrative gives no explanation as to the cause of death.[47] Adding to the bitterness of death is that Elimelech and his sons have all died in a foreign land. They are disconnected from their homeland and their inheritance; this is of vital importance as the plot unfolds. The glaring reality is that Naomi and her sons' two wives, Orpah[48] and Ruth,[49] all find themselves as widows in Moab.[50] A journey that begins with the initiatives of men is turning out to be a story about the collaborative survival of women.

More severe than the misfortunes of famine and death is the tragedy of childlessness. Widowhood is viewed as a vulnerable state within ANE culture; however, widowhood is a harsher reality when one is a widow *and* has no children. Although she is older and has given birth to children before, Naomi is in a similar circumstance to that of her daughters-in-law, they are all childless.[51] It can be argued that this tragedy was more severe for Ruth and Orpah because they were younger and foreigners and there was only a slight possibility of them finding Israelite husbands in Judah.

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47 Do Mahlon and Chilion die at the same time? What is the cause behind their deaths? Baylis, proposing that Mahlon and Chilion's names are related to the verbal roots for sickness and pining, asserts that the sons were already sickly when their family immigrated to Moab; Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth," 415. Rather than viewing the deaths of Elimelech and his sons as the result of long-standing illnesses or even divine punishment for moving from the Promised Land to Moab, perhaps the ambiguous deaths serve to highlight the characters that are left standing; Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

48 Orpah's name can be linked with *oreph* "nape of the neck,"; Saxegaard, "'More Than Seven Sons'," 262. Also, Sasson, *Ruth*, 20–21. Or it may be associated with the Ugaritic *'rp* meaning, "cloud,"; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 7. Or the name may be related to Arabic *'urfa* meaning "mane"; Campbell, *Ruth*, 56.

49 Ruth's name may mean "satiation" or "overflowing with moisture," but it is difficult to be dogmatic about the meaning; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 7. Campbell suggests we "tentatively adopt this as the explanation of the name, and then await new information"; Campbell, *Ruth*, 56. Ruth's name could also mean "friendship"; Saxegaard, "'More Than Seven Sons'," 262. Also, Sasson, *Ruth*, 20–21.

50 In this section I will make little mention of Orpah as this story is mainly centred on Ruth and Naomi. This is not in any way to paint negative in a negative light, as I do not believe that the narrative intends for such a characterisation.

51 Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour," 214.

A concern for Naomi's womb, rather than Ruth's or Orpah's, is prominent within this story. Naomi is as barren as Ruth because both her sons are dead. It is Naomi that will describe herself as going out full and returning empty. Naomi's infertility is not biological; it is social or circumstantial. There is a possibility that her womb may be able to bear a child; it is just the scenario of getting a husband immediately that she sees as unlikely (Ruth 1:12–13). Naomi's suggestion of this unlikely scenario is what introduces us to a definition of infertility that is not only biological but also social. Social barrenness describes the situation of women who biologically may be able to conceive and give birth, but due to social factors such as widowhood, or has a strained relationship with her husband, she is unable to have children outside of this context.[52] Naomi says she is too old to get remarried and it is this that will seal her childless fate (or so she thinks).

Naomi seems to share a close relationship with her two daughters-in-law for her original intention is that they will all go to Judah together (Ruth 1:7). Both Orpah and Ruth are said to have shown *hesed* "loyal love" to Elimelech's family during their residence in Moab. However, quite early in the journey Naomi decides that it is more prudent for her to return by herself and so she gives a parting blessing[53] to her daughters-in-law who are not under any obligation to go back with her. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their mother's house (Ruth 1:8)[54] so that they will have the chance of establishing new families.

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52 Examples of socially barren women are Tamar—Judah's daughter in law, Ruth-Naomi, and Michal—King David's Wife.

53 "Naomi's particular expression appears to belong to a special 'benedictory' category in which the *hesed* of God is invoked as a way of concluding a relationship (cf. 2 Sam 2:6; 15:20)"; Sakenfeld, "Loyalty and Love," 202.

54 This is significant because the usual designation for the ancestral home is *bêt ʾāb* (the house of the father). Certain possibilities for this phrasing have been suggested; perhaps the fathers are dead and the mother's are the only ones alive; or that this refers to a women's quarters within a house; or that the mother is the one to whom they run for comfort after tragedy; Meyers, "Returning Home," 94–95. Meyers notes that some of the earliest commentaries assign this phrase as "a relic of an original primitive matriarchy" but she discounts this view; Meyers, "Returning Home," 95. At the time that Ruth leaves Moab it appears that her father is still alive (Ruth 2:11). I would argue that Naomi is referring to matrilineal system existing, independently or in conjunction with patrilineality, in Moab. It is important to note that arguing for matrilineal currents within a patriarchy is not the same as arguing for a matriarchy. What I suggest is that matrilineal currents may be present even within a patriarchy so that you get references of "the mother's house" or women naming children and other gynocentric elements.

Customarily when a woman's husband died, and his brothers were also dead, she could not be held to levirate marriage but must return to her own father's house.[55] In this case we have mention of the "mother's house," which in the context of Ruth's narrative is an intentional and fitting divergence from the customary *bêt 'āb*.[56] This narrative primarily focuses on the cooperation of women during crisis. It is appropriate that when Naomi wants to send Ruth and Orpah back she seeks first to entrust them to other women: their mothers. In the Naomi–Ruth narrative, men have their role but it is the women who orchestrate situations to their advantage.

Both Orpah and Ruth, however, protest and want to go with Naomi (Ruth 1:10). The older woman believes that she must clarify the gravity of her tragedy with an extended rhetorical question, based on a hypothetical scenario; "I have no more sons for you to marry, and even if I got remarried and conceived[57] tonight would you wait around for my sons to be of marriageable age?" (Ruth 1:11–13). Naomi knows that the answer to her question is a resounding "no" because even if this scenario played out, Ruth and Orpah would probably be too mature to conceive in those marriages. The end of Naomi's assessment is blunt; "the hand of the Yahweh has gone forth against me" (Ruth 1:13). Yahweh is held as the culprit behind the tragedy that has befallen the house of Elimelech.

Naomi's emptiness and loss lies behind her insistence that Ruth and Orpah go back home. She knows that life without a husband and children can be a bitter experience. As a good elder, she wants to save the younger women from experiencing a more bitter fate. Orpah listens and leaves to return to her ancestral home. Orpah may not be chastised for agreeing to return to her ancestral home, first because it is Naomi's wish, and second because it is culturally acceptable, even expected, to do so. Ruth shines as a character not because Orpah is cast negatively but because although culturally permitted to return to her ancestral home Ruth chooses to continue a familial bond that legally expired at the death of her husband and his brother.

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55 Staples, "The Book of Ruth," 154.

56 Meyers looks at Gen 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Song 3:4; 8:2 and imagery of women's households in Proverbs to conclude that the reference to the "mother's house" is intentional and significant. All these texts point to wise women who take a proactive role in their present circumstances and future, their narratives are ones in which they take the leading roles; Meyers, "Returning Home," 109–11.

57 In Naomi's hypothetical scenario she would have to conceive twins or one of the daughters-in-law would have to wait a year longer than the other one.

Ruth clings[58] to Naomi and makes a speech that in essence says "may a fatal judgment strike me if I am not true to this vow!"[59] Promising to be buried in Naomi's homeland heightens the level of Ruth's commitment for in the ANE being interred in your homeland was of vital importance.[60] Ruth's vow is not frivolous, neither is it made only to Naomi, but by invoking Yahweh Ruth also makes an oath to him. "The women's circumstances place them in a most vulnerable and weak position. Both are childless and widowed, and both know the experience of foreignness. By joining herself to Naomi, Ruth willingly joins weakness to weakness, death to death."[61]

Back in Bethlehem

When Naomi arrives in Bethlehem with Ruth she meets the excitement of the welcoming party with melancholy words, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?" (Ruth 1:20–21). An Akan phrase exists that may be used to describe Naomi's predicament at the beginning of the narrative, *N'ase ahye* (her loins are burnt)[62] and so her protest is very similar for an Akan woman because she has no children. The juxtaposition of being full (מָלֵא) versus being empty (רִיקָם) in Naomi's speech (Ruth 1:21) is cast in ironic shadow in the following notice; they arrive at Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest (Ruth 1:22). This notice of the barley harvest softens the initial tone of famine and emptiness at the narrative's outset. It also hints at the fact that Naomi may not be as empty and destitute as she believes.

Naomi and Ruth both experience what it is like to be a foreigner in search of security. Naomi migrates to Moab with her family in search of food security. Ruth migrates to Bethlehem with Naomi and gleans there to ensure their food security. The narrative highlights how women who find themselves in vulnerable positions often see networking and collaborative opportunities as key to

58 Outside the book of Ruth the subject of the verb דָּבַק is never feminine, thus Berquist suggests that in this way Ruth takes on a male role by initiating a commitment akin to marriage; Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth," 27.

59 Wilch, *Ruth*, 169.

60 This is why Joseph wills that his bones will have final rest in Canaan (Gen 50:24–26; Josh 24:32). "By insisting that she will be buried with Naomi, Ruth is further distancing herself from her homeland"; Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 33.

61 Wijk-Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 58.

62 The Akan phrase is used to describe women who are childless, and it means that her bloodline has ended.

their survival. In the Akan matrilineal context, women know that they are responsible for ensuring the security and legacy and so they often collaborate in labour, business and childcare.

Without male children and husbands, Ruth decides that she must be proactive on behalf of her melancholy mother-in-law (Ch. 2): she goes to glean in a field that belongs to Boaz, Elimelech's kinsman (Ruth 2:3). His description as אִישׁ גִּבּוֹר חַיִל "a man of great wealth" or "a valiant man" is a fitting one for his subsequent actions and relations with the two women (Ruth 2:1). Throughout the ANE material there is evidence of a particular disposition to help widows. An instruction for King Merikare shows that widows were to be provided for in Egyptian society "do justice, then you endure on earth; calm the weeper, don't oppress the widow."[63] Additionally, in the Instruction of Amenemope, the gleaning rights of a widow were encouraged and protected, "do not pounce on a widow when you find her in the fields, and then fail to be patient with her reply."[64] In volunteering[65] to go out and glean[66] Ruth accepts her status as a widow and alien in need of welfare.

Boaz encounters Ruth and gives her full permission to glean behind the reapers for all she needs; ensures safety from any male workers who may

63 Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, 100.

64 Depla, "Women in Ancient Egyptian Wisdom Literature," 47.

65 Berquist asserts that Ruth went to glean specifically for the purpose of finding a husband by seducing men during gleaning; Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth," 28. However, at this point in the story the concern is about food security and also Boaz later commends Ruth for ignoring the other men which means that she is far from the seductress that Berquist suggests.

66 Gleaning was the act of gathering the grain left behind by people who were employed to reap the grain during harvest time. Earlier in Israelite history Yahweh had instituted some laws governing reaping and gleaning. The reapers were to go through each field only once; there could be no retracing of one's steps to reap from parts of the field that they had already reaped. Additionally, the edges or corners of the fields were not to be reaped (Lev 19:9; 23:22). Whatever the reapers could not carry or collect was considered to be the gleanings. In this way Yahweh made provision for the welfare of the disenfranchised and alien (term used for non-Israelites and people who may have been sojourning for a while and so were not permanent residents on the land) within the community who did not have the means to buy their own food in abundance. The Israelites were to remember their history of being enslaved by the Egyptians. This remembrance was to inspire them to make generous provision for those who were in need. Hence, the reason why they were to leave leftovers in their grain fields, olive groves and vineyards. The categories of people that would benefit from these were the poor, aliens, orphans and widows (Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut 24:19–22). When they did this Yahweh would bestow blessings on their work (Deut 24:19).

molest her[67] as well as unlimited access to drinking water when she is thirsty (Ruth 2:8–9). Boaz does not only fulfil the requirements of the welfare law but exceeds them. Ruth may glean from the corners of the fields and moreover Boaz also instructs his workers to purposely pull out grain stalks so that she can also glean from the sheaves (Ruth 2:15–16). Not only does Ruth take home an abundant supply of grain but also she has leftovers from the meal that Boaz has earlier shared with her (Ruth 2:18). The ancient hearers of this narrative would have duly noted the generosity of Boaz and the food security that Ruth was able to gather for herself and Naomi.[68] Ruth continued to glean in Boaz's field for two months[69] until the end of the barley and wheat harvests (Ruth 1:23). Food shortage and famine "would probably have been episodic"[70] in ancient Palestine, thus a man who could ensure food for a woman, among other qualities, would have been seen as a good provider. This is why Boaz is pictured as giving Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi more than enough to eat and drink (Ruth 2:9, 14, 18; 3:15, 17).[71]

When Ruth is overwhelmed by Boaz's favourable notice of her despite her foreign status he cites her *hesed* as his inspiration. Ruth's *hesed* to Naomi has been "fully reported" to Boaz and this means that the townspeople are fully aware of Ruth's *hesed*. Not only does Boaz provide food and exceed the requirements of the social welfare law but he invokes a blessing on Ruth; "May Yahweh reward your work, and your wages be full from Yahweh, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge" (Ruth 2:12). This invocation

67 Shepherd, "Violence in the Fields?," 456. Ruth was a brave woman in a dangerous environment. Shepherd argues that Ruth was susceptible to experiencing violence while gleaning in the fields. He also asserts that this makes sense especially because Ruth is set within the context of Judges so that it is far from idyllic, peaceful and romantic, as some scholars have painted it. He helpfully traces bible translations since the KJV in order to make his point that molestation or violent encounter is what Naomi and Boaz are concerned about (Ruth 2:9, 22). Scholars like Hyman hold the peaceful view of Ruth's narrative, "Ruth tells the peaceful story of a young, Moabite woman who remains steadfastly with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and becomes a heroine of the Israelites in their own land. Unlike some other stories in the Bible, Ruth is not concerned with resolving violent conflicts"; Hyman, "Questions and Changing Identity in the Book of Ruth," 189.

68 Younger, "Two Comparative Notes on the Book of Ruth," 125.

69 "According to Deut. 16:9–12 and the Gezer Calendar, the time period from the beginning of the barley harvest to the end of the wheat harvest was normally two months, concluding at Pentecost"; Younger, "Two Comparative Notes on the Book of Ruth," 125.

70 MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?*, 59.

71 Boaz provides Ruth with barley seed so that she can give it to Naomi (Ruth 2:14, 18), this foreshadows the semen seed that Boaz will give to Ruth which results in a child for Naomi (Ch. 4); Boda, *After God's Own Heart*.

will later be remembered and recalled by Ruth at a crucial point when she is in need of Boaz's aid.

Naomi, seeing the generosity of Boaz, Elimelech's kinsman, plans to seek rest and security for Ruth and so she comes up with a strategy (Ruth 3). Since Boaz will be winnowing barley at the threshing floor, Ruth should wash, anoint herself, and put on her best clothes and go to that location. Once there she must ensure that he finishes his food and drink before going to uncover his feet and lying down.

Scholars debate the exact nature of Ruth's activity at the threshing floor. There is a range of interpretation from Ruth simply lying by Boaz's feet[72] to Ruth initiating sexual intercourse with him.[73] Some have even suggested that Ruth engaged in "sperm stealing" at the threshing floor and was able to have sex with Boaz without him knowing because he was so intoxicated.[74] The

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72 Offering herself sexually is the least of Ruth's concerns, writes Sakenfeld, Ruth is at the threshing floor for one thing only: to challenge Boaz "to carry out his levirate responsibility as one who is 'next of kin'"; Sakenfeld, "Loyalty and Love," 203. Campbell states that there is no sexual activity on the threshing floor because when Boaz speaks to Ruth he uses the "Hebrew *lwn/lyn*, 'to lodge,' the same term Ruth had used in her avowal to Naomi in 1:16. No ambivalence here! This term is never used in the Hebrew Bible with any sexual undertone"; Campbell, *Ruth*, 138. Lacocque argues "Boaz respected this woman offered to him and [by not having sexual intercourse with Ruth] thus confirmed the intuition of Naomi, who sent him her daughter-in-law"; Lacocque, *Ruth*, 96–97. Disagreeing with the assumption that Ruth initiated sexual activity on the threshing floor Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky nevertheless state that, "it is difficult to ignore the audacity of such an act and its intimate nature"; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 57.

73 Arguing that in the Arabic and Ethiopic languages there is imagery likening a bride to a sandal into which a man puts his feet, Carmichael believes that Ruth has sexual intercourse with Boaz on the threshing floor because she uncovers his feet, "feet" being an idiom for genitals; Carmichael, "'Treading' in the Book of Ruth," 248. Also, Carmichael, "Ceremonial Crux," 329–30. In a slightly different vein Nielsen writes that Ruth "uncovers her sexual organ and invites Boaz to cover her with the corner of his garment"; Nielsen, *Ruth*, 70. Linafelt and Beal propose that Boaz is startled awake and shudders (Ruth 3:8) because he has been subject to sexual activity that gives him "involuntary physical reactions"; Linafelt and Beal, *Ruth, Esther*, 54.

74 Yaron, "Sperm Stealing," 38. Also, Phillips adds a creative but unlikely perspective that Ruth, knowing that Boaz is inebriated, tricks him by exposing his genitals and lying down next to him so that when he awakes Boaz is confused as to whether or not he has had sexual intercourse with Ruth. Thus, according to Phillips, Boaz's subsequent actions of redeeming the land and marrying Ruth are all to protect his reputation and cover up his fear that Ruth may be pregnant with his child; Phillips, "The Book of Ruth—Deception and Shame," 14. *Contra* the intoxication theory, Bush asserts that the Hebrew is ambiguous as to whether Boaz is drunk and suggests a translation "to be at peace with the world," for the

sperm-stealing theory seems improbable since there is little evidence to suggest that Ruth conceived that night or that somehow Boaz had to be coerced into redeeming her. On the contrary, Boaz seems to take over the plan of action in terms of the redemption process.

Ruth's request for Boaz to spread his "wing" or "covering" over her is a euphemism for marriage (cf. Ezek 16:8). In an earlier blessing to Ruth, Boaz mentions that she has come to take refuge under God's wings (Ruth 2:12); now "on the threshing floor Ruth uses the same imagery to call Boaz to his task."[75] Ruth is honest about her need for marriage and in a general sense a redeemer[76] to protect the interests of her and Naomi also.[77] While this may be a reversal of a typical marriage proposal,[78] this seems to fit the context in which we have already had reference to "mother's house" and the protagonists are two women. It is doubtful that Boaz, apparently so concerned with following the legal customs of the day, and also seeing Ruth as a woman of valour, would engage in sexual intercourse with her before performing the appropriate marriage rites. Further, even if one supposes that Ruth initiated sexual intimacy as a way of compelling Boaz to marry her or redeem the land, the text makes it clear that Boaz does not cover her with his garment–symbolically or otherwise.[79] For Boaz the primary thing is to follow the customary process.

At the commencement of their story Naomi and Ruth may be viewed as ill-fated women in an Akan interpretation. For someone's spouse and two sons to die while "abroad" in a foreign land would raise suspicions about curses inherit

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Hebrew expression "his heart was good" (Ruth 3:7). Boaz is not so inebriated especially to the point of not recognizing when he is being "date-raped," as in the case of Lot and his daughters Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 161.

75 Wijk-Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 62.

76 Westermann believes that Ruth's use of *gō'ēl* here in Ruth 3:9 does not have to be technical or legal but is meant in a general sense, "Boaz, you are our saviour!"; Westermann, "Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth," 297.

77 For Sakenfeld, Ruth's request at the threshing floor has nothing to do with redemption of Elimelech's land neither does it have to do with ensuring offspring for the deceased Mahlon. Rather in Ruth's mind "the goal of the marriage in Ruth's mind is familial and economic security." It is Boaz, having knowledge of Israelite law and custom, which Ruth does not have, who will take this a step further and "build a more elaborate technical plan"; Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 60–61.

78 Van Wijk-Bos sees Gen 38, Judg 4:17–22 and the book of Ruth as "'counter type-scenes' to the betrothal type-scene." Males are usually the central focus of betrothal type scenes whereas in these counter type scenes it is the women at the centre arranging situations to meet their own needs or desires; Wijk-Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 39.

79 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 219.

within such a family. In such traditional thought, this background could serve as a deterrent to Boaz marrying Ruth. Akan men are advised to carefully consider the past of their potential brides, especially when they are surrounded by such unfortunate circumstances such as multiple deaths. Yet, Boaz is undaunted by whatever strange or unfortunate incidents in Ruth's past.

Flattered that Ruth has reached out to him for redemption, Boaz gives a generous benediction. Strikingly, Boaz compliments Ruth with the same adjective with which he is described. She is a woman of חַיִל (valour or excellence), furthermore this is not just the testimony of a love-struck man but he says "all my people in the gate know" this (Ruth 3:11). Remarkably Ruth, a foreigner and a woman, whom the townspeople have not known for long, is given the same character description as Boaz.

The Redemption and Levirate Marriage

Boaz approaches the closest kinsman of Elimelech with ten witnesses (Ruth 4:1–2). When the situation is clarified the nameless kinsman decides that he will not take on this responsibility. Usually Boaz's speech is translated "on the day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you must also acquire Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the deceased, in order to raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance" (Ruth 4:5). This translation, following the *qere* קָנִיתָה, is the popular one for most English versions. However, Beattie suggests that the *kethibh* קָנִיתִי should be accepted so that it would read, "on the day you acquire the field from Naomi's hand, *I* am acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the wife of the deceased, to raise up the name of the deceased over his inheritance."[80] The *kethibh* implies that the nearest kinsman realised that although he may profit from redeeming the field he would eventually have to forfeit this inheritance to any son that Boaz had with Ruth since Boaz' primary intention in marrying Ruth is to "raise up the name of the deceased."[81] The closest kinsman does not decline because Ruth is being offered to him in marriage,[82] as per the *qere* translations. Rather, the closest kinsman passes on his responsibility

80 Beattie, "Kethibh and Qere in Ruth 4:5," 493.

81 Beattie, "Kethibh and Qere in Ruth 4:5," 492–93.

82 Weisberg writes that the closest kinsman does not want to marry Ruth because he has "incest anxiety" and that is why he declines redemption; Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," 419. However, this assertion is inaccurate for two reasons. First, levirate marriage or widow-inheritance is never described as "incest" within the HB. Second, the kinsman may in fact have wanted to marry Ruth, along with redeeming Elimelech's land, because this would have been more favourable for him, economically speaking. Yet, Boaz offers to marry Ruth before he can do so.

because it is not worth his while to invest energy, which he could also put into his own inheritance, to work this field which he will have to turn over to Boaz's and Ruth's son(s) one day.[83]

Boaz legally ratifies his redemption of Elimelech's land, and marriage to Ruth, in a sandal-removal ceremony (Ruth 4:7–12). The question of the exact nature of Boaz's and Ruth's marriage may be examined here. Was Boaz's and Ruth's marriage a case of levirate marriage or widow-inheritance? The challenge of categorizing Boaz's and Ruth's marriage as a levirate union is that it does not completely conform to the scenario set forth in Deut 25:5–10. Levirate marriage, as defined in this passage, only applied to the brothers of the deceased and not to other male relatives;[84] additionally, there was a shaming ceremony for a brother who refused to take on the responsibility, whereas there is no such shaming ceremony for the closest kinsman who declines this responsibility in Ruth's narrative.[85] Possibly, it is because there is no chance of levirate marriage that Naomi is so bitter about her circumstance.[86] Further, another challenge in defining this as a levirate marriage proper is that this kind of marriage was is to perpetuate the name of the deceased,[87] but later Ruth's son is never identified as Elimelech's heir.

The legal ceremony at the gate may be more connected to the land-redemption law than levirate marriage proper (Lev 25).[88] The land-redemption law ensured that a man's inheritance would remain within the family by giving the right to redemption purchase to a male relative. Related to this is the proposition that the scenario in Ruth 4 seems to be similar to "widow-inheritance, a custom through which a man's heir inherits his widow together with his property."[89]

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83 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 77–78. *Contra* Matthews who, comparing the nameless kinsman to Onan (Gen 38:9), suggests that "the kinsman knows the children born to Ruth will become his obligation, and their very existence jeopardizes the inheritance of his own heir"; Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 240. This comparison of the kinsman and Onan, however, does not seem inherent in the narrative as he does not seem to be negatively characterised for declining the responsibility.

84 Anderson, "Marriage of Ruth," 175.

85 Although there is a sandal removed it is not certain if it is the kinsman's or Boaz's. Extant ANE sources do not mention sandal-removal as part of legal proceedings; Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 79. Thus, it is difficult to tell the degree of shame meant to be conveyed in such an action, if indeed it was the kinsman who removed his sandal.

86 Anderson, "Marriage of Ruth," 179.

87 Anderson, "Marriage of Ruth," 177.

88 Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 240.

89 Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," 418.

The reluctance to expend energy and resources in levirate marriage has been documented in several contemporary African cultures where it is practised. Finding parallels in the Ruth 4 episode, Falusi notes that in cultures like that of the Luo of East Africa there is a reluctance amongst men to act as levirs and expend time and money for the same reasons that the nameless kinsman has in Ruth's narrative.[90] In the Luo, Kuria and Kwaya cultures of East Africa a widow has the option to go back to her ancestral home with the hopes of remarriage but this step often means total disconnection from the deceased's family.[91] In order to make the levir's responsibility more attractive, levirate marriage in these African cultures has developed several forms or nuances. It is possible then that though fundamentally the same, levirate marriage in the HB also began to take on various nuances depending on the time and circumstances.

The marriage in Ruth 4 may not be identical to what is outlined in Deuteronomy 25 but it may still be termed a "levirate-type responsibility."[92] The scenario in Ruth 4 "clearly implies that a communally recognized *moral* obligation, a family responsibility, on the part of the next of kin *did* exist."[93] One can reasonably conclude that rather than one portrait of levirate marriage "biblical texts offer a mixed portrait of levirate marriage in ancient Israel."[94] Further, Boaz uses knowledge of levirate marriage to support the marriage between him and the Moabite widow.[95] The role of a redeemer does not necessitate a marriage or perpetuating of a deceased person's name,[96] but Boaz uses this context to boost his bid.

Ruth: The Surrogate Wife and Mother

Ruth stands in for Naomi as a surrogate wife in the same way that Judah, although deceived, ends up standing in the stead of his son and fathers Tamar's child. Assessing the "Widow's Plea" ostracon, Younger asks the question "Did

90 Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," 422.

91 Falusi, "African Levirate and Christianity," 304–06.

92 "Its purposes are very similar to those of levirate marriage proper, and the differences in the two obligations in regard to their legal standing, the legal rights of the parties involved, whether the obligation devolved upon the brothers of the deceased or more distant kin, and the social stigma attached to its refusal can all logically be understood to result from the fact that the obligation was less pressing the more distant the kin relationship"; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 227.

93 Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 225.

94 Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," 429.

95 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 76.

96 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 76.

Naomi have a legal option that she chooses not to exercise?"[97] The answer to this question is "yes." Naomi had the legal option of going into a levirate marriage but chooses not to entertain this option. The reason for this may be that she believes herself to be too advanced in age for a new marriage.[98] Yet, the scenario that she paints for Ruth and Orpah leaves open the possibility that Naomi, while a mature woman, is still in her childbearing years (Ruth 1:12–13). Further, "there is no compelling reason why the unnamed gō'ēl (Ruth iii. 12), Boaz and Elimelech, could not have been actual brothers."[99] However, Naomi chooses not to enter into a levirate marriage. This is why Ruth acts as a surrogate wife for Naomi.

Ruth's surrogacy for Naomi is evidenced in the fact that her new-born is explicitly described as Naomi's redeemer and son (Ruth 4:14, 17). If Obed is Naomi's son should not the child also be affirmed as an heir of Elimelech? Yet, neither Elimelech nor his sons' names are ever connected with the son. Indeed, the partnership between Naomi and Ruth is apparent in that "it is as if he belongs, directly and simultaneously, to both of them."[100]

Whether Boaz and Ruth's marriage is a levirate marriage proper, a case of widow-inheritance,[101] or a levirate-type duty is contested by scholars and seems difficult to prove definitively. Boaz declares that he has acquired Ruth in marriage so that he can "raise up the name of the deceased on his inheritance so that the name of the deceased will not be cut off from his brothers or from the court of his *birth* place" (Ruth 4:10). Who is "the deceased" to whom Boaz refers? The subsequent portion of the narrative makes more sense if the primary person that Boaz is raising a name for is Elimelech. Technically, then, Naomi should be the one with whom Boaz would raise up descendants for

97 Younger, "Two Comparative Notes on the Book of Ruth," 131.

98 Anderson, "Marriage of Ruth," 178.

99 Anderson, "Marriage of Ruth," 178. Calling it "the lesser of two evils," Anderson prefers the interpolation theory; that the original Ruth text was later redacted by those who wished to justify mixed marriages this is why there seems to be remnants of levirate marriage while at the same time it is not so strictly speaking; Anderson, "Marriage of Ruth," 179.

100 Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 391. Brenner's proposes that the Ruth narrative was formerly two separate stories about two heroines Naomi and Ruth. She attempts to reconstruct the two separate narratives but in my opinion stretches in order to do so, after all she herself calls them "hypothetical tales"; Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 391–97. Also, Brenner notes the "ambiguous fashion" in which Obed is painted as either Naomi or Ruth's son; Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour," 214.

101 Weisberg, "The Widow of Our Discontent," 423. "Widow-inheritance differs from levirate marriage in that the children of the second union are regarded as the heirs of their biological father and the deceased."

Elimelech. However, Ruth is substituted for Naomi. Ruth acts as a surrogate for Naomi. When the child is born Naomi claims him by breastfeeding him (Ruth 4:16). The neighbourhood women name Naomi's son and agree that he will give her a new lease of life and sustain her as she ages (Ruth 4:15, 17).

The blessing that the elders give to Boaz concerning Ruth[102] invokes other Israelite matriarchs who struggled with childlessness, "may the Lord make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built the house of Israel; and may you achieve wealth (חַיִל) in Ephrathah and become famous in Bethlehem. Moreover, may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah, through the offspring which the Lord will give you by this young woman" (Ruth 4:11–12). The three women invoked in this blessing cover the range of infertility: biological and social. Rachel's difficulty in conception and Leah's secondary infertility are recalled. Ruth and Tamar, both socially barren because they are childless widows, alter their circumstances[103] through a serious interaction with a parent-in-law.[104]

For certain, Ruth is not a sole heroine or independent protagonist in this narrative. "Naomi and Ruth share the dominant role of the chief heroine or, rather, are placed in this position interchangeably."[105] However, Ruth is the one, through the *hesed* of Yahweh, who enables the reversal of emptiness to fullness, barrenness to fertility.

Ruth takes on the role of a son as she fills in for Naomi's deceased sons but she ends up being praised as being more than seven sons to Naomi (Ruth 4:15).[106] Seven sons represent the ideal number of births (1 Sam 2:5; Job 1:2; 42:13) so Ruth is worth more than the ideal number of sons that Naomi could have birthed.[107] Ironically, Naomi left Bethlehem with three men and the Moab episode ended in tragedy, however she comes back with only one daughter-in-law and the narrative ends in prosperity. The woes of famine, widowhood and childlessness are replaced by the joy of the womb. The birth of the

102 For a comparison of this blessing to the Ugaritic marriage-blessing of Keret, see Parker, "Marriage Blessing in Israelite and Ugaritic Literature," 23–30.

103 Westermann writes that Ruth and Tamar's stories must be hailed as "narratives about daring and self-confident undertakings of women"; Westermann, "Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth," 290.

104 However, the means through which Tamar solves her social barrenness, disguising herself to seduce her father-in-law, is in sharp contrast to the solution that Ruth finds through the oath to her mother-in-law.

105 Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 386.

106 Saxegaard, "'More Than Seven Sons'," 258.

107 Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 257.

baby ushers the rebirth of the mother and a new identity that overshadows all other past identities.

In the Naomi–Ruth story, Ruth's creative power is not only shown through her fertility and the ability to build up Boaz' house (Ruth 4:11–12). More importantly, through her surrogacy Ruth recreates her and Naomi's identity. Naomi is no longer the one who is empty and bitter because her life has been enriched and her legacy ensured through Obed (Ruth 4:15). Further, Ruth's prior identity as a destitute widow is overshadowed by her characterisation as a woman of חַיִל "valour" (Ruth 3:11). Ruth's status as the foreign daughter-in-law is eclipsed by her new identity as the one who is better than seven sons (Ruth 4:15).

Naomi gains a daughter even though she has lost her sons. From a matrilineal perspective, the townswomen's remark that Ruth is more valuable to Naomi than seven sons is accurate. Ruth, Naomi's adopted daughter, is the one who will give Naomi some hope of a family. While in Akan culture sons provide economic security and protection for mothers in their old age, it is the daughters that continue on the bloodline. Thus, every Akan woman ideally wants to have both sons and daughters but if left with a choice as to the gender of her only child she will opt to have a daughter.[108] The network between the women is celebrated. Further, the penchant for multiple children in traditional ANE and Akan cultures may be reframed; sometimes one child may be more of a gift and hold more promise than multiple children.

What begins as a story of Elimelech and his wife Naomi concludes as a story about Naomi and Ruth; two women who suffer loss and whose identities are recreated at the narrative's close. Through their companionship and collaboration they are able to create security. Naomi and Ruth are relatable characters in the Akan worldview because they work together as women to achieve their goal instead of waiting on the initiative of men. There is a general stereotype in Akan that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law do not get along.[109] While tension among in-laws may be somewhat of a cross-cultural phenomena; in a matrilineal society such tension becomes more serious since this system's smooth function depends on the cooperation of women.

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108 Sarpong cites the case of a woman who after labour was told that she delivered a baby boy and with exasperation she remarked "*Bre bebrebe yi nyinaa, barima*?" Meaning "has all this trouble been because of a boy?"; Sarpong, *Girls' Nubility Rites in Ashanti*, 8. Additionally, Sarpong notes that even greetings at the birth of a boy or girl can differ in that God is thanked in the greetings when it is a girl.

109 While tension among in-laws may be somewhat of a cross-cultural occurrence, in a matrilineal society such tension becomes more serious since this system's smooth function depends on the cooperation of women. This is briefly explored below.

This conception about the interaction between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law has been passed in some communities to such an extent that it is seen as proper to keep one's distance when relating to one's female in-law. This attitude, however, is not advised when a woman has given birth to only sons because in a matrilineal descent system such a woman has no daughters to carry on her line, only sons. Such a woman is considered wise when she befriends and pampers her daughter-in-law so that she can have more input and interaction with her grandchildren, who traditionally will be closer to their mother's parents than their father's. Therefore, it is known that typically women with only sons make ideal mothers-in-law. From an Akan perspective it is thought that Ruth and Orpah don't want to leave Naomi because she has been an unusually kind and generous mother-in-law. In an Akan perspective Naomi is a wise and exemplary mother-in-law.

Yahweh's three-fold promise to Abraham is fulfilled (Gen 12:1–3). First, the promise of land is fulfilled (on a smaller scale of course) because Elimelech's land is preserved due to the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. Second, the promise of descendants is realised for while Ruth only has one child it is enough because Obed will be the father of Jesse who in turn will be the father of Israel's first messiah David. Third, the promise of being a blessing to "all the families of the earth" is achieved when Moab, despite its incestuous beginnings and tense relationship with Israel, becomes part of the genealogy of Israel again. The Ruth-Naomi story is an infertility narrative that works purposefully in theological and cultural ways. The cultural meanings of widowhood impact the identities of these two women and as the narrative progresses the women's collaboration in cultural traditions results in a recreation of their identities. On a theological level the narrative reveals the threats to and the fulfilment of the promise of the *tôlĕdôt* (generations).

Conclusion to the Naomi-Ruth Narrative

Both Naomi and Ruth become wom(b)en. This move through the rite of passage of motherhood means they are conferred with honour and blessings given by peers and elders. Ultimately it is through the line of these two formerly childless women that Israel's messiah, David, will emerge. A mother-in-law and daughter-in-law creatively endure the harsh reality of childless widowhood in their cultural context. Naomi and Ruth become the ones who "build the house of Israel" (to use the imagery of the elders in 4:11), the *tôlĕdôt* and overcome the obstacle of famine, widowhood and infertility.

The blessing given to Boaz invoked three women who experienced biological and social barrenness (Ruth 4:11–12). The mention of Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah is significant since these women's ability to reverse their desolate situation is the focus of both narratives. The male characters in the story advance the plot but it is the women who really bring about turning points and reversals. Naomi's emptiness becomes abundance because of her willingness to go back to the land that her husband left. Although it was more likely that she would find a husband in her own region, Ruth left and later found one in Bethlehem. The challenges of famine, death and barrenness are surmounted all because the women take social risks.

Ruth and Tamar share many similarities.[110] The chief similarity is that they are socially, not biologically barren. "It is not Ruth's and Tamar's own bodies that fail, but death and unwilling partners cause their inability to conceive."[111] The reality that social barrenness was just as tragic as biological barrenness is evident in the extreme solution that Tamar employs as well as Ruth and Naomi's collaboration to ensure marriage to a kinsman redeemer.

110 Already Ruth's narrative is linked to the ancestral narratives of Genesis for "it begins with two great dangers, childlessness and hunger, which we encounter frequently in the ancestral narratives"; Westermann, "Structure and Intention of the Book of Ruth," 286.

111 Claassens calls this "enforced barrenness"; Claassens, "Resisting Dehumanization," 662.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusion

The HB barrenness narratives illustrate the cultural significance attributed to childbirth in the ANE context. The present study has integrated narrative criticism, cultural anthropology and African biblical interpretation as a multidimensional methodology to uncover the cultural and theological layers of the narratives. The wom(b)an reading highlights the centrality of childbirth, and conversely the marginalising consequences of infertility, through a comparison of Akan and ANE cultural attitudes regarding infertility. Since traditional Akan beliefs regarding (in)fertility are similar to that of the ANE context, this study shows that an Akan perspective is a useful bridge between Western readings, in which infertility is not viewed so tragically, and the original ANE context, in which barrenness is the ultimate shame and tragedy of the woman.

In addition to examining biological infertility this study also explored "social barrenness." "Social barrenness" is an original term that encapsulates other kinds of barrenness situations described within the HB. An awareness of the cultural reality, and varieties, of infertility further elucidates the desperation and lengths to which certain women would go in order to have children. Equally, the desolation and shame borne by women, who for various reasons were unable to attain wom(b)anhood, is also attested. An appreciation for the cultural dynamics of the narratives also illuminates its theological message(s). The narratives suggest that divine agency is essential to the perpetuation of lineages. The cultural-narrative approach coins the new word "wom(b)an," which visually emphasises the centrality of the fecund womb to a woman's identity in the ancient Hebrew and traditional Akan cultures.

Throughout this work there has been an intentional interchange of the words "barrenness" and "infertility". In the contemporary Western world the term "barrenness" is often perceived to be archaic, even pejorative in some instances. The more appropriate term, influenced by the Western biomedical system, is "infertility." Yet for many women within traditional cultures the English word "barrenness" is often used to translate native words and imagery that underscore something more than biological inability; the word reveals a desolation and lack that affects one's very identity.

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(In)Fertility in the Ancient Near East

The study of women's fertility in the ANE provides a helpful background for our study of infertility in the HB (chapter 2). The agricultural setting of the ANE fostered a culture of fertility. The tragedy attributed to infertility stems from the importance placed on the fertility of humans, animals and the land. This culture of fertility is also evident in the worship of major deities many of whom were essentially fertility gods. The divine connection to fertility was dominant. This provides a helpful background that elucidates the HB's portrayal of YHWH as the womb-shutter and womb-opener. Since fertility was so fundamental, to say that barrenness was detrimental is not an exaggeration. We have surveyed extant sources (cultic and legal material, myths and proverbs) that show predominantly negative attitudes towards barrenness.

While there are several men depicted as infertile within ANE texts, infertility was perceived, by and large, to be a woman's problem. Since marriage was defined as a union to perpetuate the husband's lineage it followed that a barren wife held a precarious place within her home. While some laws apparently protected the barren wife from abuse in her marital home, we cannot be certain about how widely these laws were applied. Typically women did not exercise power in ways that men did therefore they depended upon the power of fertility. A barren woman in the ANE was a woman without honour and security.

A woman's childbearing was a matter of individual, familial and community honour. Western readings of infertility tend to centre on biomedical issues while traditional interpretations place prominent stress on the individual, collective and socio-spiritual implications of barrenness. The actions that ancient women took in order to resolve barrenness included making vows, initiating polygynous arrangements and the use of various herbal remedies. The social and spiritual meanings attached to conception and childbirth lead to the conclusion that childbirth was a life-stage to which ANE women aspired. In fact, childbirth was *the* ultimate social and spiritual experience in the lives of many ANE women.

(In)Fertility in Akan Culture

As in the ANE context, fertility is also an essential part of traditional Akan culture (chapter 3). Traditional Akan society is primarily oral in nature. The challenge in writing about oral cultures is the propensity to dismiss or minimize realities that do not have a long tradition of written documentation.

Additionally, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the relevance and value of majority-world perspectives for the interpretation of biblical material. Historically, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament studies have been heavily dominated by male Euro-centric perspectives. This study joins other works that seek to bring diverse cultural perspectives to the fore so as to enrich biblical interpretation and dialogue. A fundamental assumption of this study is that reading biblical literature from differing cultural perspectives is not only "interesting" but also illuminating. In many instances, as in the case of the barrenness tradition, these cultural perspectives provide interpretations that are more germane to the ANE context than some Western perspectives.

Reading (in)fertility through Akan cultural lenses is a helpful bridge between a Western context, where infertility is primarily a biomedical diagnosis, and the original ANE context, in which barrenness is a shameful and tragic condition that alters one's identity. The Akan matrilineal descent system makes barrenness an extreme tragedy for a woman. In this culture, rites of passage such as naming, puberty and marriage are important. Yet, motherhood is *the* most momentous rite of passage for many women. Conversely, barrenness is regarded as *the* obstacle to enjoying the ultimate life experience. Girls are socialised toward fertility through the rites of the community, the use of music, proverbs and even traditional clothing. Explicit and implicit encouragement is given to women to have as many children as possible so as to attain honour, security and the continuation of the matrilineage. For an Akan woman being a "wom(b)an," a mother, is the primary identity.

Barrenness is believed to be the physical manifestation of a spiritual offence. Taboo violations, regarded as serious offences against deities, are believed to incur the punishment of barrenness. A primary taboo within Akan culture is abortion. As such childless women are often suspected of having had multiple abortions before marriage. In addition to abortion, the violation of menstrual taboos was also thought to be another cause of barrenness. More traditional beliefs concerning the origins of barrenness range from divine displeasure, witchcraft to hereditary/generational curses.

A childless woman needs commiseration; the Twi proverb "*wunni ba a, due*," communicates this belief that a childless woman is pitiable. Further, the threat of divorce, social shame and financial insecurity are some additional consequences that make infertility an agonizing state for many women. Whatever the suspected cause, barrenness is primarily the tragedy of the woman and her matrilineage. In the same vein, the consequences of barrenness predominantly fall on the woman and her matrilineage. Surveying (in)fertility within the Akan culture provides a traditional vantage point from which we are sensitised to the lives of barren women in the HB barrenness narratives.

Biological Barrenness

In part one of the barrenness tradition, we examined the biological barrenness stories (chapters 4 and 5). Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel are three women in Genesis who experience biological barrenness. As relatives, by blood and through marriage, their narratives are fertile ground for exploring perceived causes and consequences of infertility. Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel all share the prominent attributes of beauty and barrenness, yet there are unique features in each woman's story. The solutions of surrogacy, adoption and natural remedy are utilized but ultimately do not prove satisfactory for these women. An Akan reading of these women's experiences exposed the reality that within traditional culture barrenness is not only an individual difficulty but may also be perceived as a hereditary or generational bequest. While the HB narratives are illustrative of a patrilineal culture, an Akan matrilineal reading finds that these women are seeking honour and security in similar ways to women within traditional Akan society. Further, these women's experiences are not side-plots but are essential to ancestral traditions.

Barrenness in Genesis

Sarah's infertility is especially concerning because the rhythmic flow of the *tôlĕdôt* takes a pregnant pause. In regards to the biological barrenness narratives Sarah's childlessness goes on for the longest time. Her subsequent menopause makes it humanly impossible for her to conceive and give birth. Sarah is the only woman, within the biological barrenness tradition, who directly attributes her barrenness to YHWH.

Sarah's barrenness journey is revealing. The texts testify to the socio-economic and spiritual implications of barrenness. Sarah's statement "perhaps I will be built up by her" portrays her as a woman who wants to be the architect of her own legacy; she will not leave the matter entirely to her husband or YHWH. In taking the lead to construct her own plan Sarah highlights women's agency in the ancient world. Like other women in the Hebrew infertility narratives, Sarah, after exploring seemingly viable options, will have to wait for the divine enabling of conception and birth.

Sarah and Abraham try adoption as an option. Lot and Eliezer's adoption, however, were male-initiated strategies that did not provide satisfactory results for Sarah. Like many Akan women, Sarah took her fertility into her own hands. She strategizes a solution that she believes will benefit her. Eventually, however, the surrogacy plan turns sour. Sarah's desire to "be built up" reveals some matrilineal undercurrents; even within a patrilineal society Sarah shares the same concern of creating her own legacy as many women in Akan culture.

Sarah's story indicates the complexity of surrogacy even in a cultural context where it is customary.

The narrative bears witness to how women, in wanting to fulfil personal and/or social expectations, may oppress other women in the process. Sarah was desperate to build her legacy, and then to protect her miracle-child's inheritance, therefore she oppressed another woman and her child in order to realise the desire. Even modern reproductive labour for sale agreements between consenting parties are fraught with issues, how much more the coerced reproductive labour of women from disadvantaged socio-economic positions. Hagar, a slave, is oppressed because Sarah must have her child at all costs, even at the exploitation of her fellow-woman. Sarah's desire to "be built up" results in her "being small" in Hagar's eyes. A woman who in that time was regarded as socially inferior judged the actions of her mistress as exploitative. In seeking honour at all costs, Sarah actually brings shame on herself. The Sarah-Hagar narrative has implications for modern reproductive labour arrangements, within both traditional and Western contexts, where women of disadvantaged and vulnerable status may fall prey to the exploitation of couples willing to do "whatever it takes" to realise their own desires.

Sarah and Abraham's solutions of adoption and surrogacy do not provide satisfactory results in the long-term. This seems to be YHWH's plan; a theological message of the narrative is that the divine promise will be fulfilled when all human possibilities have been exhausted. The motif is encountered throughout the HB: the generations of promise will be primarily perpetuated by YHWH's initiative and intervention. Both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the possibility of fertility, and sexual pleasure, but eventually YHWH has the last laugh at the birth of the miracle child Isaac.

Isaac grows up and is in need, according to his father, of a suitable marriage partner. Rebekah's long and detailed betrothal narrative sets the stage for an idyllic married life. Her beauty, the love that Isaac has towards her, and the comfort she brings to him after Sarah's death are no safeguard against infertility. Rebekah's portrayal as "the one" only serves to intensify her later barrenness experience. The lavish bridewealth, gifts and fertility-benediction given by her family are details that anticipate that Rebekah will experience abundant fertility. Rebekah's barrenness, apart from the impact for her and Isaac, is an impediment to the Abrahamic promise; if Isaac, the sole heir, has no child then he cannot continue the lineage of promise.

Although Isaac and Rebekah navigate childlessness for two decades there is no indication that he considers marrying another wife. Neither does Rebekah suggest a surrogate. Isaac joins Manoah and the Great Woman of Shunem's husband in that they, for unknown reasons, do not contract

polygynous unions for the purpose of childbirth. However, Rebekah's silence about childlessness anticipates the stories of other women in the Former Prophets who do not have recorded protests. The text never exposes the characters' reasons for deviating from this cultural norm. Isaac functions as an intermediary and YHWH finally grants the couple with twin sons. Rebekah does not have the challenge of dealing with a rival wife but she does endure a difficult pregnancy. As attested in some ANE sources, and even in present traditional cultures, twins were simultaneously auspicious and bad omens. Childlessness within the *tôlĕdôt* comes at unexpected junctures and is primarily reversed by YHWH's intervention.

Rebekah's story underscores the dominant ways in which women in both ancient and contemporary cultures have been valued and defined; by beauty, hospitality and fertility. The question looms; does Rebekah's silence and lack of action concerning her infertility suggest an acceptance of her state? Could such silence be meaningful for contemporary people who journey the varied paths of childlessness, voluntarily or involuntarily?

After Rebekah's story, we examine Rachel's barrenness experience. Rachel's sororal polygynous marriage adds salt to her childless wound. As Jacob's favourite wife she receives love and favour, yet this does not satiate her heart's hunger. Rachel's narrative, perhaps more than any other, suggests that in this ANE context a husband's great affection for his wife may not always have sufficed as a substitute for children. Rachel explored the options of surrogacy and natural remedies in order to solve her barrenness. However, these options do not yield results that bring complete satisfaction. Rachel's life as a co-wife with her sister reveals how the social strands of unrequited love, sororal jealousy and contentious polygyny can further complicate childlessness. Ultimately, the power that enables Rachel's attainment of motherhood's summit is YHWH.

Rachel's character develops in complex ways. At the beginning of her story she is the eager shepherdess who runs to announce the arrival of a strange relative (Gen 29:12). At the end of her story she is the victim of maternal mortality caused by breech birth (Gen 35:16–19). Rachel is the only formerly barren woman to die due to childbirth. The penchant for fertility proves to be fatal. Throughout history many women have continued bearing children at great risk to their health, even their life. For many women in traditional cultures, past and present, the thought of dying childless is more tragic than the prospect of dying in childbirth. Rachel, like countless other women, experiences the highest cost of wom(b)anhood; maternal mortality. The bitter irony is that it is precisely the fulfilment of Rachel's desire, not its denial, which brings about her death.

Barrenness in the Former Prophets

The barrenness experiences of Manoah's wife (Judg 13), Hannah (1 Sam 1) and the Great Woman of Shunem (2 Kgs 4), all in the Former Prophets, were examined in Chapter 5. These stories highlight the social consequences of childlessness, whether it is the relationship dynamic between husband and wife or between rival wives. Each woman's (in)action concerning their childlessness represents the various ways in which ancient women may have coped with this condition. It is not only the social consequences but also the spiritual dimension that is also essential to the barrenness tradition. In one instance the cause of barrenness is attributed directly to YHWH while in the others no presented cause exists. The method through which YHWH reverses barrenness is different for each of the barren wives but is preceded by an announcement by YHWH's representative.

Manoah's wife, Hannah and the Shunammite woman are the barren wives. Two of these women present divergences from the previous barrenness stories. Manoah's wife and the Great Woman of Shunem neither protest nor take initiative to change their childless circumstance. It has been this study's thesis that fertility was so central to a woman's identity that barren women would go to great lengths in order to get a child. These two women provide an exception to this rule and in this way cut against the grain of the tradition. Since in every culture there are exceptions and divergences, perhaps these two women offer a glimpse into a minority number of ancient women who may also have found satisfaction despite the cultural attitudes towards childlessness. These narratives function as divergences, and perhaps even subversions, of the HB barrenness tradition.

Manoah's wife's narrative is unique among the other barrenness narratives. Judges 13 presents a twist in the barrenness tradition in a few ways. First, neither Manoah nor his wife protest or seek to rectify their childlessness at the onset of the narrative. There is no rival wife, surrogacy plan or talk of experiencing shame. Second, Manoah's wife does not receive the intermediation of her husband or a religious figure and neither does she visit a sanctuary site. Third, the other twist in the barrenness tradition is represented by Samson's twisted locks; the physical manifestation of his nazirite devotion. These seven twists of hair feature prominently within Samson's narrative and, depending on whether they are grown or shorn, are indicative of the presence or departure of YHWH (Judg 13:5; 16:19–22). Fourth, Mrs Manoah is the only woman who is given strict pregnancy prescriptions because of her child's nazirite vocation. Fifth, the naming of Samson represents another deviation from custom. Samson does not receive a theophoric name or a name that is related to the circumstance of his conception or birth. Rather, Samson's name presages the self-centred activities that characterise most of his life. In the end his name amplifies the irony when he meets his match in Delilah, whose name likely means "night."

YHWH takes the initiative of appearing to Manoah's wife without any protest by the childless woman. Desperate times call for desperate measures; it is for this reason that YHWH takes the extreme action of calling a judge to be a nazirite from the womb. This story typifies the absolute claim that YHWH can make on an unborn child, especially one born through divine intervention. The characterisation of Manoah's wife challenges the thesis that *all* women went to great lengths in order to become wom(b)en. This narrative serves a significant function in subverting cultural expectations concerning women's (in)fertility, both within the HB barrenness tradition and in traditional cultures today.

Grand narratives typically feature a formidable obstacle that must be overcome. The greater the obstacle is, the grander the coming champion. The scrolls of Samuel begin with the impossible impediment of infertility. Subsequently, and unsurprisingly, one of Israel's influential figures, Samuel, comes by way of a formerly barren woman. Hannah's journey (1 Sam 1–2) reveals the gravity of childlessness for many women in the ANE context.

There are a combination of components in Hannah's experience that underscore the centrality of wom(b)anhood in ancient and contemporary traditional cultures. First, the dynamics between co-wives in non-sororal polygyny were largely determined by who bore the most heirs for the patrilineage. Peninnah's taunting does not only strain the polygynous marriage but intentionally exacerbates Hannah's grief over her childlessness. Second, the husband and wife relationship is also important. Even Elkanah's love and special treatment of Hannah could not supplant her desire for a child. Like Rachel, Hannah is not content to be the favoured wife. She covets another relational role and love; wom(b)anhood. Third, the role of divine revelation and cultic consultation play dominant roles in the HB barrenness tradition as well as in present traditional cultures. Hannah takes the initiative to enter a cultic site and without the guidance of a religious figure she makes an enduring vow. Fourth, the barrenness tradition almost always prefigures the coming of a special child who will play a prominent role in the lineage and/or larger national history. Hannah's vow is not in vain. As a priest, prophet and judge, Samuel becomes one of the most important personalities within Israelite history. Fifth, Hannah's narrative highlights the role of honour and shame in (in)fertility, this role is often thought about differently in non-traditional cultures. Hannah sings about the reversal of shame and defeat that accompanied the birth of a child. In using warrior imagery to describe her situation Hannah emphasises the high esteem ascribed to mothers in the ancient world. Finally, the examination of Hannah's story found that in the ancient world, and even today in traditional cultures, childbirth is *the* coveted rite of passage for many women.

Hannah has five more children, making her the only formerly barren wife with many biological children. While the Hebrew descent system was

patrilineal this did not negate the desire and urgency that many women felt to ensure their legacy and security through children. Elkanah likely did not fully grasp the multi-layered effects of Hannah's barrenness. Similarly, today many do not fully appreciate the manifold implications of childlessness for many women in traditional non-Western cultures, as in the matrilineal Akan people.

The account of the Great Woman of Shunem (2 Kgs 4:8–17) is the last barrenness narrative within the Former Prophets. The narrative represents an aberration from the barrenness tradition. In addition to Mrs Manoah, the Shunammite woman's experience testifies to the reality that cultural normativity does not eradicate peculiarity.

While she is a Great Lady of reputation and means it is not certain whether her affluence and prominence could have substantially mitigated the social stigma of childlessness. Extant ANE sources indicate that apparently one's wealth could not completely protect from the perceived worse fate of childlessness. Monarchs, scribes and other wealthy individuals express profound discontent with their infertile predicament. Wealth and prominence, however, likely increased one's options regarding possible solutions. Economic means enabled, for example, a man to marry an additional wife. Although we know that wealthy men did not always pursue this option (Isaac, Manoah and the Great Woman of Shunem's husband). In the case of the Shunammite woman, affluence could shield from *some* of the shame and stigma associated with childlessness—perhaps.

The Shunammite woman is the only one within the barrenness tradition to be granted a child as a repayment for a kindness (2 Kgs 4:14). Elisha takes concern and prophesies that the Shunammite Lady will have a son. Elisha behaves as Eli does; he makes a prophetic announcement that is not directly initiated by YHWH. Yet, the prophecies' fulfilment incites the conclusion that YHWH is invested in "opening" the women's wombs.

The narrative may function as a subversion of patriarchal Hebrew societal norms. The lack of protest may suggest that this woman was always contented with her circumstance. On the other hand, the Shunammite's infertility may have pushed her far beyond the point of hope. In Elisha's perspective the Lady's hospitality and charity make her a deserving candidate for wom(b)anhood. The Shunammite's nameless son is not insignificant. Rather, he is twice a product of a miracle; at his birth and his resurrection. Promise and fulfilment are held in tension by the threat of death in this story. However, once again the infertility tradition highlights YHWH's power to do what is humanly impossible.

The biological barrenness narratives depict the lives of women, who although similar, also differ in some respects. These stories highlight the social consequences of childlessness, such as bewildered husbands, strained sororal

relationships or damaging interactions between rival-wives. The shame that accompanied infertility was overwhelming for some and so they sought solutions that brought further complication into their lives.

An Akan reading of these three women highlighted several cultural layers and elements. First, the role of religious figures in prophesying conception to women. Second, that social status did not necessarily diminish or eradicate the expectation that barren women should have children. Third, there are cultural-religious expectations that a child of a formerly barren woman is dedicated to shrines and that the child's physical appearance (e.g. hairstyle) is a non-verbal testimony of the miraculous circumstance of his/her birth.

Characters' pursuit to become wom(b)en is not always stated explicitly by the narrator. An argument could be made that some women were satisfied with their childless state. Even if infertility were accepted on an individual level, would it not have garnered pity and negative reactions on the communal level? Still, the Shunammite's lack of protest concerning her childlessness, and her cry not to be given false hope, may be resources to provoke consideration of other reasons for childlessness besides the biomedical factors often foremost in people's minds.

Social Barrenness

In part two of this study we examined the category of "social barrenness" (chapters 6, 7, and 8). This term originated from an observation of Akan traditional culture and its attitudes towards fertility and infertility. We explored certain narratives that do not fit the category of biological barrenness. Within social barrenness we focused on marital estrangement, rape and widowhood as social obstacles to fertility. These circumstances were explored on the narrative and cultural layers. Social barrenness describes the condition of some women within the HB who biologically may be able to give birth but due to certain social circumstances, such as estrangement from a husband, rape, or widowhood, are unable to do so. Whether for temporary or permanent periods these women all experienced the challenge of attaining wom(b)anhood. While women in these narratives had to deal with the trauma of death, sexual violation, denied conjugal rights and widowhood they also had the added social burden of being childless.

Women who can be classified as socially barren are the estranged wives Leah and Michal; the rape victims, Dinah and Tamar; and the widows Tamar the daughter-in-law of Judah, Naomi and Ruth. These women have not typically been included within studies on the HB barrenness tradition. This is

chiefly because many Western interpretations arise out of the same worldview in which biomedicine determines and diagnoses infertility. The medicentrism often obscures the voices and experiences of people in traditional cultures, past and present, who experience barrenness although they may not be "diagnosed" as such in the Western context. From a traditional culture's perspective an important part of the HB barrenness tradition are the characters whose social situations, not biological inability, render them childless. Historically, some women are able to overcome the social obstacles to their childlessness; other women cannot.

Marital estrangement, rape and widowhood were all social obstacles to fertility. Estranged wives who are denied conjugal rights by their husbands face the challenge of not having the opportunity to conceive, much less to birth and rear children. Additionally, women known to have been sexually violated, while culturally and legally permitted to marry (either the rapist or another suitor), were possibly rendered unmarriageable and thus unable to have children. Further, widows who had no children, or surviving children, did not perceive of themselves differently than their childless married counterparts. Although of differing marital statuses, these women were all deemed to be barren in Hebrew, and larger ANE, culture. Social barrenness was viewed as equally unfortunate as the situations of the biologically barren wives. Whether for temporary or permanent periods these women all encounter the challenge of attaining wom(b)anhood.

Leah and Michal: The Estranged Wives

Leah and Michal are wives that are denied their conjugal rights. This conjugal activity, obviously, is the prerequisite for conception and childbirth. Besides this they share a few details in common that invite the reader to assess their narratives together. Both Michal and Leah are the first wives of their husbands. Additionally, both women's fathers use them to trick or entrap the prospective suitor. The political or personal interests of their fathers demand a great cost from the daughters.

Leah's sororal co-wife likely instigates and encourages Leah's social barrenness. The cessation of their sexual relationship pushes Leah to trade mandrakes for one night with her husband. While there were laws to discourage and prohibit women from denying the conjugal rights of their husbands, the same expectation was not necessarily upheld for men.

Leah's narrative provides helpful insight into our understanding of the factors that lead to a social barrenness experience. Leah's use of surrogacy during her estrangement from Jacob is not a satisfactory permanent solution for her. Eventually, she wishes to have more biological children of her own.

While Leah endured a period of conjugal deprivation she was able to overcome this social obstacle. From an Akan perspective Leah is a typical example of the unloved wife. While Leah may be unloved in comparison to Rachel, in an Akan reading Leah is still the preeminent wife not only because she is the first wife but also because she bears the most children. The Hebrew narrative's notice that Jacob is buried beside Leah is very important from this perspective. One's funerary rites are as significant as any other rite of passage. The fact that Jacob insists on being buried in the ancestral burial plot beside Leah is noteworthy (Gen 49:29–33). Leah may have not received the affection due to a wife but she received the honour and privilege that was hers as a first wife.

Michal's characterisation at her introduction is in stark contrast with her portrayal at the end of her narrative. In the beginning the princess is the besotted bride who helps David flee her father's murderous intent. At the end of the narrative, Michal is a begrudging wife who despises David's self-abasement before the ark, a symbol of his divinely initiated kingship. David's political concern for his burgeoning dynasty, rather than Michal's change from her former besotted self, is probably what motivates David to deny Michal of her conjugal rights, thus rendering her childless.

Michal is taken from a husband who is affectionately attached to her and perhaps this is what precipitates her scorn for David. For her scornful speech to the king, and indirectly her show of disloyalty to his dynasty, Michal is sentenced to a life of social barrenness. Unlike Leah, Michal's estrangement is permanent; the narrative records no resumption in her and David's relationship. Further, David's dynasty is protected by this childlessness since Michal's child could potentially become loyal to the Saulide not Davidic dynasty.

Dinah and Princess Tamar: Sexually Violated Women

Dinah and Princess Tamar's stories demonstrated how, despite legal material suggesting otherwise, young women could be rendered unmarriageable due to sexual violation. As the only named daughters of their fathers these daughters are both further disadvantaged by their father's passivity to their situation. While both women's brothers take revenge on the perpetrators it is really unclear as to whether the women's best interest is the priority. Dinah and Tamar are sexually violated women who do not get the chance to have their lineage included in the prominent genealogies of their fathers.

Dinah and Tamar, after their trauma, both disappear from the narrative scene. Both women are frozen in time, unable to move through marriage onto the ultimate life-passage. Dinah and Tamar are rendered socially barren because, as sexually violated women their marriage opportunity is diminished and they are rendered childless.

Dinah's introduction as "the daughter of Leah" foreshadows the neglect that she too will face (Gen 34:1). Dinah is a flat character that is silent and passive. The tragedy of Dinah's narrative is linked to the male characters that serve their own interests. Due to her rape, Dinah does not become a wom(b)an; she is never mentioned within the *tôlĕdôt* again.

Dinah whose name connotes justice and vindication receives no justice at all. Shechem violates her and then has the audacity to proceed to "normal" marriage negotiations as if he were a legitimate suitor. Dinah is a victim in another sense, the primary man who is supposed to care for her honour, her father, is disinterested and almost silent throughout the entire episode. Her brothers kill her rapist and soon-to-be "husband" and take her away. Dinah's wishes or her voice is *never* heard in the narrative.

Dinah only receives one other mention within the HB. Genesis 46:8–27 gives an account of Jacob's family members who travelled with him to Egypt. Dinah is mentioned among the company (Gen 46:15). Jacob apparently has other unnamed daughters (Gen 46:7) and thus it is understandable that these daughters' children are also unnamed. Dinah is named alongside her brothers whose children are also named. Yet there is no mention of Dinah's children. Dinah disappears into genealogical obscurity—there is no one to carry on her name or memory.

Like her mother Dinah experiences social barrenness. Unlike her mother, we are not told that Dinah overcomes her predicament. She never has her own children mentioned in the *tôlĕdôt*. This is the end of Dinah's lineage. The Akan would say of Dinah, "*N'ase ahye*," (her lineage has ended). Shechem's violation of this woman should not be interpreted only as a momentary act, but an abuse that causes a permanent suspension in Dinah's progression through her rites of passage. Dinah never becomes a wom(b)an; she never becomes a mother.

Like Dinah, Princess Tamar is the only named daughter of her father. Like her ancestress, Tamar is also sexually violated by a prince. Unlike Dinah, however, Tamar is raped by her half-brother. This princess is a sexually violated sister. The narrative exposes the momentary and long-term effects of sexual violation, in this case incestuous rape. Tamar is forced, cast out and subsequently remains as a desolate woman. Tamar is frozen in time due to this trauma and becomes socially barren.

Tamar's narrative is not one only centred on the immediate rape but also on the lasting effects of such a trauma. After facing the ordeal at the hands of her half-brother Amnon, Tamar is then told by her brother Absalom to keep silent and forget the matter. King David does not take a proactive role, either to discipline Amnon or to comfort Tamar. The subsequent honour killing and revenge does nothing to repair or change Tamar's circumstance. Rather, having

been prevented from moving into the life-passage of marriage Tamar remains as a resident in Absalom's house. Not only has she endured the immediate violence of rape but she also has to endure the long-term, even permanent, consequence of rape in the ancient context: social barrenness. Since Tamar does not marry, she cannot have children. Yet, possibly hope comes in the form of her namesake niece who embodies her beauty and may be a way through which Tamar copes with her social barrenness.

Women, despite their socio-economic status, have historically been vulnerable to sexual crimes. It would be expected that a princess, likely heavily chaperoned, would not experience such a trauma, or that a young woman with many brothers would be safe from the harm of another man. To make matters worse, to add further tragedy to their trauma, the father and brothers who are supposed to protect Dinah and Tamar are either silent or enact revenge that brings no restitution to these violated women. Dinah and Tamar represent the spectrum of women—migrants to monarchs—who are still susceptible to sexual abuse. In traditional societies, the violation that one experiences can quickly become an experience that eclipses one's identity. Dinah and Princess Tamar remain silent and desolate, they stay in a continual state of social barrenness.

The added tragedy that accompanies the rape of Dinah and Tamar is that they remain unmarried and childless; therefore, they are no longer alive in the lineage. Shechem and Amnon's violations are not only sexual; they are genealogical assassinations—through their actions they have written these women out of the *tôlĕdôt*. The momentary actions bear life-long effects and future genealogical consequence. Shechem and Amnon's actions deprive these women of the traditional legacy of having direct descendants counted in the history of Israel. Violation is followed by desolation and ultimately genealogical death.

Tamar and Naomi–Ruth: The Widows

Historically widows have faced stigmatisation and exploitation. Even today many widows endure religious, social, financial and sexual abuse. They are vulnerable persons. One can imagine that these prevalent abuses against widows were even more pronounced in times past. In ancient times the circumstances would have been dire in contexts where women depended heavily on men for their livelihood and protection.

The narratives of Tamar (Gen 38) and Naomi and Ruth portray them as barren women, not in biological terms, but in the social category of widowhood. Since they are widows, and in Naomi's case have been bereaved of sons, they cannot have children unless they are able to enter into a levirate marriage proper or levirate-type marriage. Additionally, since the men who should

be taking initiative on their behalf do not (in the case of Tamar), or cannot (in the case of Naomi and Ruth), the women must take initiative to secure their future. Furthermore, they put in place a strategy that will get them the results that they need to survive as women in the ancient context.

Tamar journeys through the challenging terrain of levirate marriage and social barrenness. Deception plays a prominent role in this narrative. It is Judah's deception that keeps Tamar socially barren and it is deception that Tamar will use to rectify her situation. Tamar's solution, to attain what she desires most, is one of the more extreme strategies utilised within the barrenness tradition. Twice widowed, Tamar will do what she deems necessary in order to become a wom(b)an.

In repeatedly spilling his semen Onan was ensuring that there would be no son for his dead brother, thereby making him the prime heir of Er's estate. However myopic Onan was, the extent of his evil was not only dishonouring his brother's memory. His sexual relationship with Tamar was selfish and spiteful; it afforded Tamar no benefit[1] and no children to provide her with a permanent connection to the family of Judah.[2] With every semen-spill Onan severs both his brother's and Tamar's connection to the Judah clan.

Tamar may be viewed as a cursed woman in Akan culture. A woman whose husbands have both died would be suspected of some ill intentions or actions. A widow, in some cases, may be suspected of foul play and responsible for her husband's sudden demise. Rather than considering that a husband's death may be the result of divine judgment some widows have found themselves the subjects of various rituals that are intended to prove or disprove her role in the husband's death. Such a train of thought seems to be Judah's perception in the Hebrew narrative.

Judah has met his match in Tamar; she is just as, and probably more, shrewd than him. Who advocates for Tamar? Not her deceased husbands' family or her own. Tamar, twice widowed is a woman who must assess her options and choose her path. She wants to be a wom(b)an and will do all within her power to ensure that she does. The point that Tamar goes to such lengths to ensure her conception indicates the toll that social barrenness could take on an ancient woman. For Tamar the ends justified the means.

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1 Lambe describes Onan's actions as deception "Tamar is deceived by Onan each time that he cohabites with her, for Tamar expects Onan to be responsible to the Levirate law"; Lambe, "Genesis 38," 107.

2 Niditch, writing of the childbearing role of women in ANE marriage, states that a wife's "children are a visible statement of her connection with the clan … if the woman has not borne his children, however, she has never fully become a member of his family"; Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted," 144–45.

Tamar is twice widowed but doubly blessed with twins. The reality remains, however, that Tamar does not have a husband and Judah also does not sleep with her again (Gen 38:26). Marriage was the context within which women could have as many children as possible. At the narrative's close Tamar is a triumphant mother of twins, and yet on the other hand she is still an unmarried woman who cannot go on to have more children.

The Naomi-Ruth narrative centres on two women who overcome the trials of famine, widowhood and infertility. The narrative is the only one, within the barrenness tradition, that details so much about the woman's life before the arrival of a baby. Naomi's widowhood and childlessness is viewed more tragically, she uses the words "empty" and "bitter," while Ruth does not comment on her own childlessness, or directly petition divine aid to resolve her situation. It is primarily Naomi's childlessness that is resolved in this story. The Naomi–Ruth narrative illustrates the reality that the birth of a baby also resulted in the rebirth of the mother as she attained an identity that overshadowed past experiences.

A concern for Naomi's womb, rather than Ruth's or Orpah's, is prominent within this story. Naomi is as barren as Ruth because both her sons are dead. It is Naomi that will describe herself as going out full and returning empty. Naomi's infertility is not biological; it is social or circumstantial. There is a possibility that her womb may be able to bear a child; it is just the scenario of getting a husband immediately that she sees as unlikely (Ruth 1:12–13). Naomi's suggestion of this unlikely scenario is what introduces us to a definition of infertility that is not only biological but also social. Social barrenness describes the situation of women who biologically may be able to conceive and give birth, but due to social factors such as widowhood, or a strained marital relationship, are unable to have children.

Ruth is a surrogate wife and mother. Ruth stands in for Naomi as a surrogate wife in the same way that Judah, although deceived, ends up standing in the stead of his son by fathering Tamar's child. Ruth's surrogacy for Naomi is evidenced in the fact that her new-born is explicitly described as Naomi's redeemer and son (Ruth 4:14, 17). If Obed is Naomi's son, should not the child also be affirmed as an heir of Elimelech? Yet, neither Elimelech nor his sons' names are ever connected with Obed. Indeed, the partnership between Naomi and Ruth is apparent in that "it is as if he belongs, directly and simultaneously, to both of them."[3]

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3 Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 391. Brenner's proposes that the Ruth narrative was formerly two separate stories about two heroines Naomi and Ruth. She attempts to reconstruct the two separate narratives but in my opinion stretches in order to do so, after all she herself calls them "hypothetical tales"; Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 391–97. Also, Brenner notes

For certain, Ruth is not a sole heroine or independent protagonist in this narrative. "Naomi and Ruth share the dominant role of the chief heroine or, rather, are placed in this position interchangeably."[4] However, Ruth is the one, through the *hesed* of YHWH, who enables the reversal of emptiness to fullness, barrenness to fertility.

In the Naomi–Ruth story, Ruth's creative power is not only shown through her fertility and the ability to build up Boaz' house (Ruth 4:11–12). More importantly, through her surrogacy Ruth recreates her and Naomi's identity. Naomi is no longer the one who is empty and bitter because her life has been enriched and her legacy ensured through Obed (Ruth 4:15). Further, Ruth's prior identity as a destitute widow is overshadowed by her characterisation as a woman of חַיִל "valour" (Ruth 3:11). Ruth's status as the foreign daughter-in-law is eclipsed by her new identity as the one who is better than seven sons (Ruth 4:15).

The Ruth–Naomi story is an infertility narrative that works purposefully in theological and cultural ways. The cultural meanings of widowhood impact the identities of these two women and as the narrative progresses the women's collaboration in cultural traditions results in a recreation of their identities. On a theological level the narrative reveals the threats to and the fulfilment of the promise of the *tôlĕdôt*.

Both Naomi and Ruth become wom(b)en. This move through the rite of passage of motherhood means they are conferred with honour and blessings given by peers and elders. Ultimately it is through the line of these two formerly childless women that Israel's messiah, David, will emerge. The blessing given to Boaz invoked three women who experienced biological and social barrenness (Ruth 4:11–12). The mention of Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah is significant since these women's ability to reverse their desolate situation is the focus of both narratives. A mother-in-law and daughter-in-law creatively endure the harsh reality of childless widowhood in their cultural context. Naomi and Ruth become the ones who "build the house of Israel" (to use the imagery of the elders in Ruth 4:11), the *tôlĕdôt* and overcome the obstacle of famine, widowhood and infertility.

A Way Forward

The theological layers of these narratives is not muted, but rather amplified by the study of the cultural experiences of infertility. The women are set within the ANE context, in which the supposed causes of infertility are numerous.

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the "ambiguous fashion" in which Obed is painted as either Naomi or Ruth's son; Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour," 214.

4 Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 386.

Yet, within the HB narratives the causes are largely unexplained and the only direct explanation given in a few cases point to YHWH as the womb-shutter. He is the one who is attributed with giving or withholding children. Second, some of the infertility stories record religious encounters that are rare for women in the HB. The Shunammite has the opportunity to host a prophet over a considerable amount of time. Hannah prays at Shiloh and makes a vow all without the mediation of a man (before Eli approaches her). Manoah's wife meets the angel of YHWH. All these experiences highlight the initiative that women took in spiritual matters and in some cases the initiative is first taken on behalf of the woman (Rebekah, Manoah's wife, The Shunammite Woman). Third, infertility solutions employed by certain women do not ultimately suffice and subsequently YHWH provides the miracle child. In most of the cases these children make an important contribution within the family, community or nation.

The Akan material is intended to sensitize the reader to key elements within these infertility stories. While they are not completely analogous this study has sought to bring the Akan traditional culture into conversation with ancient Hebrew culture so as to sharpen the focus on the reactions to and experiences of infertility present in these narratives.

The variety of women who experienced infertility is noteworthy. Infertility could affect women of all ages and social statuses. Additionally, at each point the role of husbands, brothers and fathers can vary. While these stories have been described as a barrenness tradition it is also important to note that each one brings a different nuance and contribution to this tradition. Another contribution is the way in which women collaborated with (as in the case of Naomi and Ruth) or subjugated (as in the case of Sarah with Hagar) other women in order to achieve their fertility desire.

While ancient Hebrew society was based on the patrilineage, the tragedy of female childlessness was grave because of various socio-economic and spiritual repercussions. These barrenness narratives emphasises the fact that in many cultures, ancient and contemporary, infertility threatens the very identity of a woman. The gravity of barrenness within patrilineal cultures is apparent, however, female infertility within a matrilineal culture adds a further layer of complexity. Infertility is the dreaded experience, the tragedy that places a woman in a frozen state preventing her from experiencing the reproductive rite; wom(b)anhood.

This present research encourages further that would be helpful and of interest. Several other women could arguably be included in the social barrenness category. Lot's daughters and their incestuous affair with their father could be analysed and would perhaps show that childlessness was dreaded more than incest (Gen 19). Infertility as a divine punishment within the HB could

be investigated from the story of Abimelech's household, who are punished with barrenness because of Abraham's deception (Gen 20). Jepthah's daughter and her inability to marry and have children because of her father's vow could also be examined within the context of social barrenness. Other texts relating to fertility loss, such as the death of David and Bathsheba's newborn (2 Sam 12:15^{b}–23), could be compared with relevant ANE material to discover the causes and impact of infant mortality.

This study has focused on narratives, thus further studies in this area could focus on the figurative texts of the HB. The figure of barren Zion (Isa 54) is of interest since she seems to be the culminating character of the barrenness tradition. Many of the important elements from all the barren women are put together to intensify the misfortune and desolation caused by Zion's barrenness. Zion is the ultimate image of a socially barren woman since her sons have been taken away from her and her husband has abandoned her. The text vacillates between the trauma of Zion's children dying and being exiled. Of course, in the ancient imagination exile was often characterised as "being as good as dead." Included within the figurative infertility studies is also the figure of Rachel who laments for her dead children (Jer 31:5). Additional research concerning fertility references to YHWH, images of him as midwife and mother, are advantageous in providing further depth to the study of (in)fertility within the HB.

The Akan reading that has been used within this study can be further refined and developed. An Akan perspective highlighting the cultural layers of the HB beyond the issue of fertility would be very informative. Furthermore, Akan translations of the HB could be studied to assess how the HB narratives are interpreted in cultural and theological ways. This study has endeavoured to show the way in which a conversation between an ancient text and a modern traditional culture may be fruitful in highlighting certain features of the former. This dialogue between the two cultures does not mean that they are completely analogous but rather that there are categories, such as infertility, whose layers (cultural, theological etc.) may be further defined and reframed as a result of such a conversation.

Scholars and professionals are presented with the challenge, and opportunity, of exploring the meaning(s) of womanhood and motherhood in ways that are sensitive to present cultural realities and also forge paths ahead to future liberating possibilities. More work is needed in the areas of infertility, motherhood, and voluntary childlessness from Western *and* non-Western perspectives.

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